HOW A SCHOOL LEADER CREATES A SUCCESSFUL DROPOUT PREVENTION PROGRAM: A CASE STUDY

by

Alan J. Sorensen

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. The three theories used in this study included constructivism (how people learn), social-cognitive learning theory (how people think, feel, and behave influences their ability to learn), and attribution theory (how people interpret and explain behavior). The central question and subquestions of this study revolved around how administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Data collection included documents, testimonies written by graduates, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. Individual interviews were conducted with three former administrators, one former teacher at the school who is now the administrator of the school, and three teachers. A focus group was conducted with seven teachers, including two of the teachers interviewed separately. Data analysis included pattern, theme, and content analysis methodology to understand the data, as suggested by Patton (2002). Key findings included (a) successful dropout prevention programs have innovative and engaging curriculum, (b) they create a culture or community, (c) they provide a structure which includes such things as broadening teacher roles and decision-making within the school, and (d) all the successes within the school need to be publicized.

Keywords: at-risk, case study, dropout, dropout prevention, engaging curriculum, generate community, sustain community, graduation rate

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my wife, Deborah Elliot. Her faith in me and her willingness to sacrifice our time together were instrumental in completing this work. I would also like to dedicate this dissertation to my administrative mentor, Dr. Mary Jo McLaughlin.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my chair, Dr. Randy Tierce, and my committee member, Dr. Jessie Talada for their invaluable input and encouragement during this process. I would especially like to acknowledge my wife, Deborah Elliot, for putting up with me during this process and allowing me the time and energy to complete this journey. I would like to acknowledge the participants in this study for giving me their time and knowledge that allowed me to complete this dissertation.

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List of Abbreviations

Academy Advisory Corporate Council (AACC)

Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP)

General Education Diploma (GED)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)

Ogdensburg Free Academy (OFA)

Science, Technology, Engineering, Art, and Math (STEAM)

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM)

Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention (VADP)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Scholars note that high school dropout prevention is an on-going concern in education throughout the United States (Foran, 2015; Garza, Drysdale, Gurr, Jacobson, & Maushard, 2013; Hazel, Pfaff, Albanes, & Gallagher, 2014; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Slaughter, 2009). One of the tools school districts use to combat low graduation rates is dropout prevention programs. Dropout prevention programs can be used at all levels of K-12 education (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Hazel et al., 2014; Schargel, 2013). More than any other developed country, the United States has been struggling with the problem of dropouts (Izumi, Shen, & Zia, 2013; Rumberger, 2011). Dropout prevention programs include individual efforts, grade-level efforts, school-wide efforts, and district-wide efforts. Many districts establish a dedicated dropout prevention school to deal with this problem (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010; Gay & Airasian, 2010; Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002; Wheeler, Keller, & DuBois, 2010). While dropout prevention is a concern at all grade levels, the present study was focused on one high school dropout prevention school.

The importance of dropout prevention programs came to the forefront in education with the establishment of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) of 2001. One of the standards established by the NCLB Act was that for schools to be effective, graduation rates needed to show annual yearly progress. The NCLB (2002) defined graduation rates as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years" (§1111). As a result of this requirement, more states have looked to dropout prevention programs in an effort to boost graduation rates.

Chapter One of this study includes examination of the background of alternative education, of which dropout prevention is a part. The chapter also reflects my background and

interest in the subject of dropout prevention. In addition, the chapter includes the problem statement and a discussion of the significance of the study as well as the research questions and a list of key definitions.

Background

Historical Context

Alternative education has been a concern in United States public schools since its inception (Young, 1990). For example, Tarusha (2014) said, "The phenomenon of not attending school by children and youth is as old as the school itself" (p. 460). In fact, one of the early leaders in American public education, Horace Mann, was opposed to any public funding of alternative education (Clausen, 2010). Modern alternative education has been traced by some researchers to the free school movement in the early 20th century (B. E. Conley, 2002). Furthermore, Lange and Sletten (2002) believed the modern alternative education movement started in the 1960s with a move toward more relevant curriculum and schools that met the needs of all students.

Although definitions of alternative education vary, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2002b) defined alternative education as a program that "addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education" (p. 82). One type of alternative school that has grown since 2002 is dropout prevention school. A strong catalyst for this growth has been the NCLB Act (2002), which requires states to issue "report cards" on schools. One category closely reviewed on these report cards is graduation rates. As such, a key goal or objective of many dropout prevention

schools and programs is to increase the number of students who graduate. Unfortunately, not all dropout prevention schools and programs have improved graduation rates.

Social Context

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, most high school students were not expected to continue on to college (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). High school graduates at that time focused on trades for male students or becoming full-time mothers and homemakers for female students. Schneider and Stevenson (1999) stated, "life for most adolescents in the 1950s was a time of optimism, economic security, and clearly defined career and gender roles" (p. 18). In addition, Schneider and Stevenson noted that marriage was an acceptable reason for female students to leave high school before graduation. Furthermore, Schneider and Stevenson explained that for youth in the 1950s, in River City (their study community), "finishing high school and moving onto college was not a typical goal for high school students. Aspirations to attend college were not typical among high school seniors" (p. 25).

However, things started to change in the late 1960s and into the 1970s. By then, more students were expected to complete high school. According to Turley, Santos, and Ceja (2007), "The proportion of U.S. high school seniors expecting to go to college . . . has increased substantially over the last several decades" (p. 1201). Reynolds and Pemberton (2001) also stated "the rate of high school completion doubled from 41% in 1960 to 82% in 1997" (p. 704).

Theoretical Context

Raywid (1994b) noted there are three major indicators of successful alternative education programs. Those three indicators include (a) schools generate and sustain community, (b) make learning engaging, and (c) provide the organization and structure needed to sustain alternative schools. Theoretical frameworks that support the ideas posited by Raywid (1994b) are

constructivism theory, social-cognitive learning theory, and attribution theory. A theory closely related to attribution theory is care theory.

The first of these three theories, constructivism theory, has its roots in education. For example, Slavin (2006) stated "the essence of constructivist theory is the idea that learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own" (p. 243). Furthermore, according to All and Brandon (2010), the theory of constructivism is about how people learn. Adherents to constructivism theory believe learning is an active process in which learners build on past knowledge to develop new ideas. Raywid (1994b) also indicated that a key part of school community was getting students to take ownership of their learning. Experiential learning, hands-on learning, and student developed projects are part of constructivism and basic tenets of Raywid's (1994b) first indicator of success.

The second of these three theories, social-cognitive learning theory, suggests that how people think, feel, believe, and behave influences their ability to learn. This is referred to as efficacy. Bandura (1993) noted that self-efficacy will "influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (p. 118). The concept of self-efficacy is a critical consideration addressing dropout prevention. The majority of students who are at risk of dropping out have a feeling of poor self-worth (Tobin, 1991; Vecchio, Justin, & Pearce, 2010). They have been ignored and alienated by the system for years (Sullo, 2007). Alternative students feel abandoned by the system and, in turn, they abandon the system and their future (Quin, 2017; Wehlage, Rutter, England, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). In an alternative education setting, the positive teacher-student relationship can help students begin to develop a more positive self-outlook of their capabilities (Gibson & Bejinez, 2002; Rutledge, Cohen-Vogel, Osborne-Lamkin, & Roberts, 2015; Seita & Brento, 2005; Turley et al., 2007).

Attribution theory espouses "that people interpret behavior in terms of its causes and that these interpretations play an important role in determining reactions to the behavior" (Kelley & Michela, 1980, p. 457). In addition, according to Alderman (1990), students will show a high degree of motivation only if they know how their personal actions contributed to the successful outcome.

As noted, care theory is closely related to attribution theory. According to Noddings (2001), in care theory, the caregiver listens to the needs of the individual, responds to the needs of that individual, or is able to help the individual understand why the needs cannot be met. The individual being cared for recognizes the effort which then creates a caring relationship.

Situation to Self

I have been involved in education since 1982, and the majority of the time I have worked in alternative education. My first job out of college was with the Ogdensburg Free Academy (OFA) in Ogdensburg, New York, where I worked in the OFA dropout program. The OFA program had two students when I started and, by the end of the year, it included five students. While considered by the district as a dropout program, the OFA dropout program included students who were on the verge of dropping out and students who had been expelled from the traditional secondary school for disciplinary reasons. Since I began teaching in 1982, most of the students I have taught have been considered to be at risk. I have worked with students in court schools and dropout schools and programs; in addition, I have worked with students repeating 1 or more years of school, low-performing students in traditional schools, students on school-sponsored construction sites, and students in drug rehabilitation programs.

The success of students who are at risk of dropping out is very important to me. As a high school student, I was on the verge of dropping out of school, and would have, if not for the

intervention of a loving and concerned principal. Because of the intervention of this principal, I was able to graduate from high school instead of dropping out. Many practices and programs have developed because of the concern and interest of leaders like my former principal.

Despite this concern and interest, I have seen some students in some of these programs experience success, while others have not. Because I have noticed that the results are not consistent, I want to understand what school leaders do to create successful dropout preventions programs. I believe that students at risk of dropping out respond best to some key elements: personal attention and care, ownership of their own education, and teachers who are invested in student progress. When I encountered the Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention (VADP), I was impressed with the graduation rate they had and have had for more than 2 decades. I was intrigued and curious to understand how a program, with all its students identified as at-risk, could have a graduation rate significantly higher than similar programs. The VADP's 97% average graduation rate exceeds most dropout prevention programs and challenges the graduation rate of most traditional high schools.

Every year I spend the first few days of school getting to know my students. Not just their names, but who they are, and what their passions are. I tell them what I am passionate about. I share, not just facts, but my life. I also tell them my weaknesses. Sometimes students get a warped sense of infallibility about teachers. I let them know that I have problems too, just like they do. I do not just make statements, I share my problems because it allows me to connect on a personal level with my students. Sharing my problems with my students allows me to follow the admonition of Glasser (1993) to get to know students and let students get to know me. Yonezawa, McClure, and Jones (2012) told teachers if they get to know their students, they can

"use this personal knowledge to design more effective individualize instruction and guidance and help students feel competent in and connected to the world" (p. 42).

My philosophical assumption is epistemological in nature because I will be obtaining evidence from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Creswell and Poth (2018), an epistemological research approach is used to obtain "subjective evidence from the participants" (p. 20). My research also reflects a constructivist belief that students individually discover and transform complex information to make it their own. Individual learners discover and internalize complex information to make it relevant. Constructivism is based on how people learn, and learning must be an active process, utilizing preexisting knowledge and building new ideas on that preexisting knowledge.

Problem Statement

High school dropouts continue to be a problem in education (Balfanz et al., 2014; Hazel et al., 2014; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Slaughter, 2009). In addition, there are both ethical and economic repercussions for both the dropouts and society (Henry & Rouse, 2012). Dropout prevention is a problem that has been addressed in great detail throughout the literature (Alderman, 1990; Aron, 2003; Bloom, 2010; Cismaru & Ivan 2016; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Furthermore, it is critically important to effectively address dropout prevention in today's world because of the negative implications and impacts that dropouts have on society and the negative impacts the students experience in their lives as a result of dropping out (Henry & Rouse, 2012; Tavarkolian, 2012). While there have been many studies examining effective strategies for preventing dropouts (Carver et al., 2010; DeAngelis, 2012; National Alternative Education Association, 2014; Tavakolian, 2012), there is very little data concerning specific dropout prevention programs. According to S. J. Wilson and Tanner-Smith (2013), the "National

Dropout Prevention Center/Network currently lists hundreds of model programs. Relatively few of those programs, however, bill themselves exclusively or explicitly as dropout prevention programs" (p. 357). While some research has compared different dropout prevention programs (Lowery, 2015; Simmons, 2013; Wells, Gifford, Bai, & Corra, 2013), few have evaluated specific successful dropout prevention programs (Bloom, 2010). Although leadership is cited as important in the success of dropout prevention programs (Foran, 2015; Min, Modeste, Salsbury, & Goff, 2016), there have been limited studies on the impact of leadership on the success of any specific successful dropout prevention program. Therefore, the problem of this study is the impact of a school leader on the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand the impact of a school leader on the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. A successful dropout prevention program will be defined as a program that has a dropout rate lower than the national average dropout rate of 20% and a graduation rate higher than the national average graduation rate of 80%. Three theories guided this study. The first theory is constructivism because students learn by building on past knowledge, while Slavin (2006) said that learning must be individual to be effective. Social-cognitive learning theory is the second theory used to frame the present study (Bandura, 1993). Noted social learning theorist Bandura (1993) stated how people feel about themselves will affect how they will behave and motivate themselves. Finally, attribution theory was also used to frame the study. Scholars note in attribution theory, the degree of motivation depends on an individual's

knowledge of how personal actions will contribute to a successful outcome (Alderman, 1990; Kelley & Michela, 1980).

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the body of knowledge of how a school leader impacts the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. By implementing successful programs, schools may lower the number of dropouts in society and thereby reduce the negative impacts that dropouts have on society. Dropout prevention schools may also lower the number of individuals who experience negative impacts in their personal lives due to dropping out of high school.

This single instrumental case study is empirically significant because it addresses gaps in the literature in how a school leader impacts the development of policies and programs that create successful dropout prevention programs. Researchers noted that high school dropout prevention will continue to be a concern in public education (Balfanz et al., 2014; Hazel et al., 2014; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Slaughter, 2009). In addition, there is considerable information in the literature that suggests criteria for successful high school dropout programs (Aron, 2003, 2006; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2013; National Alternative Education Association, 2014; Raywid, 1994b; Schargel, 2013; Smink, 2009). However, few studies have been focused specifically on the role a school leader plays in the development of successful programs (Bloom, 2010).

This single instrumental case study was theoretically significant because it served to investigate how a school leader impacts the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Many scholars have conducted studies related to effective policies for preventing high school dropouts (Carver & Lewis, 2010; DeAngelis, 2012;

National Alternative Education Association, 2014; Tavakolian, 2012). Leadership is often mentioned in research as important in the success of dropout prevention programs (Foran, 2015; Min et al., 2016). However, there have been no studies on the impact a school leader has on the policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program.

Because of the implications both in human capital and economic capital (Henry & Rouse, 2012), it is imperative that society provides education opportunities or programs to help decrease the number of high school dropouts. Therefore, this study was practically significant because it was conducted to identify and understand the programs and policies used by a school leader to develop a successful dropout prevention program. A school leader has a difficult job and needs to "cultivate and manage communities of teaching and learning in schools that embody a balance of press and support" (Louis, Murphy, & Smylie, 2016, p. 311; see also Greenberg et al., 2003). A leader's policies impact curriculum, hiring of teachers, school culture, and much more. Additionally, Louis et al. (2016) found that "School leadership, is therefore, at its core a social relationship" (p. 312).

Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) found that for an alternative school to be successful, teachers need to "structure curriculum and pedagogy so that it is more 'interesting' and 'engaging' to students at risk of dropping out" (p. 84). A leader's policies need to affect the hiring of staff and teachers. Foran (2015) stated that teachers need to be specifically hired to fill positions in alternative schools and not "'bumped' into these positions or forced to work in the program" (p. 6). A leader's policies also need to focus on the structure of the school to include class scheduling, bell systems, location, and more (Foran, 2015). Furthermore, this current study provides information that other districts could use to duplicate the success of the VADP in developing leaders to guide their own dropout prevention school. The information gained by this

study can be useful to school district throughout the country intent on developing successful dropout prevention programs. Of interest to the location being studied is if they can continue the initial success of the program during changes of leadership in the coming years.

Most of the documents used in this study, including year-end reports, the *TorchBearer* (school newsletter), and student testimonials could not be cited to protect the confidentiality of the participants. However, a sample of each document is listed in Appendices A, B, and C, respectively.

Research Questions

This qualitative single instrumental case study was guided by the following research questions:

Central Research Question

How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program?

Research Subquestions (SQs)

SQ1: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader nurtures a sense of community that fosters success in a dropout prevention program?

SQ2: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader cultivates an environment that enables teachers to develop creative, engaging, and innovative curricula?

SQ3: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops teacher leaders?

Definitions

1. *Alternative Education Programs* - An alternative education program is any program or school that meets the needs of students in nontraditional ways that are not necessarily used in traditional schools.
2. *At-Risk Students* - At-risk students are students who are at risk of not completing high school.
3. *Dropout Prevention Programs* - Dropout prevention programs or schools are those designed to prevent high school students from leaving school and not graduating.
4. *Engaging Curriculum* - A rigorous curriculum that uses project-based activities, student-directed learning, and other innovative practices to engage students more in the learning process is considered an engaging curriculum.
5. *Graduation Rate* - Graduation rate is the percentage of students starting ninth grade who complete high school.

Summary

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand the impact of a school leader on the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Chapter One included a description of the background of alternative education in the United States as well as dropout prevention programs which fall under the broader spectrum of alternative education. The research questions used to guide this study were also developed and stated in the chapter. In addition, the empirical, theoretical, and practical significance of this study were discussed. Chapter One also highlighted the gap in the literature that was explored in the study. Chapter Two includes the theoretical framework for the study

and a review of relevant literature on alternative education, dropout prevention programs, and the impact of leadership on alternative education and dropout prevention programs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Successful dropout prevention programs are defined as programs that improve on the national dropout average of 80%. Current literature indicates that alternative education is considered to be any school or program that falls outside the traditional classroom school. The NCES (2002b) defined an alternative education school as a "school that addresses the needs of students which typically cannot be met in a regular school and provides nontraditional education which is not categorized solely as regular education, special education, vocational education, gifted and talented or magnet school programs" (p. 55).

This literature review covers the historical lineage of alternative education in the United States. Chapter Two also includes examination of the current literature regarding different types of alternative education and the elements that make an alternative program successful. Chapter Two specifically addressed the impact of a leader of a dropout prevention program on the success of the program. Because dropout prevention programs have been identified in the literature as alternative education programs, this study served to investigate the factors that constitute an effective alternative education program, in general, and an effective dropout prevention program specifically.

Theoretical Framework

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), a theoretical framework "draws on theory, research, and experience, and examines the relationship among constructs and ideas. As such it is the structure or heuristic that guides your research" (p. 7). Creswell (2009) explained that in

qualitative study designs the theoretical framework is "used as a broad explanation for behaviors and attitudes, and it may be complete with variable, constructs, and hypotheses" (p. 61). The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Dropout prevention programs are one type of alternative education program. According to Raywid (1994b), there are three major indicators of successful alternative education programs: (a) schools develop community, (b) they develop a climate that makes for engaging learning, and (c) they plan ahead and make sure that in the future both community and engaging learning can continue. The theoretical frameworks that support Raywid's (1994b) ideas for successful alternative schools are constructivism theory, social-cognitive learning theory, and attribution theory.

Constructivism theory has its roots very early in education. "The essence of constructivist theory is the idea that learners must individually discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own" (Slavin, 2006, p. 243). According to All and Brandon (2010), constructivism involves how people learn. "The major theme is that learning should be an active process in which learners construct new ideas or concepts based upon their current or past knowledge" (All & Brandon, 2010, p. 89).

Raywid (1994b) indicated that a key part of school community was getting students to take ownership over their learning. Experiential learning, hands on learning, and even student developed projects all are part of constructivism and basic tenets of Raywid's (1994b) first indicator of success.

Social-cognitive learning theory suggests that how people think, feel, believe, and behave influences their ability to learn. This belief is called self-efficacy. Bandura (1993) said that efficacy will "influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves, and behave" (p. 118). Self-

efficacy is critical to dropouts. The majority of students who are at risk of dropping out have a feeling of poor self-worth (Brentro, Brokenleg & Van Bockern, 1990; Sulkowski, DeMaray, & Lazarus, 2012, Tobin, 1991; Vecchio et al., 2010). In an alternative education setting the positive teacher-student relationship can help students begin to develop a more positive outlook on their capabilities (Sulkowski et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2014).

Also contributing to Raywid's (1994b) ideas are basics of attribution theory that "are that people interpret behavior in terms of its causes and that these interpretations play an important role in determining reactions to the behavior" (Kelley & Michela, 1980, p. 457). According to Alderman (1990), students will show a high degree of motivation only if they know how his or her personal actions contributed to the successful outcome.

Closely related to attribution theory is care theory. Noddings (2001) stated that in care theory, the carer listens to the cared-for and satisfies the needs of the cared-for. "The cared-for, in turn, contributes by recognizing the effort; he or she feels cared for and reveals this recognition in some form of response. Then, and only then, does a caring relationship exist" (p. 36).

Related Literature

History of Alternative Education

Alternative education has been a concern in United States public school since its inception (Young, 1990). For example, Tarusha (2014) said, "The phenomenon of not attending school by children and youth is as old as the school itself" (p. 460). Horace Mann, one of the early leaders in American public education, was opposed to any public funding of alternative education (Clausen, 2010). However, public funding has become a part of modern alternative education. Modern alternative education has been traced by some researchers to the free school

movement in the early 20th century. A. S. Neill, who founded the Summerhill School in England in 1921, believed that traditional schools were confining and restricted personal development and freedom (B. E. Conley, 2002). According to other researchers, the modern alternative education movement started in the 1960s with a move toward more relevant curriculum and schools that met the needs of all students (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006).

Definitions of alternative education vary but include individualized programs (Foley & Pang, 2006; National Alternative Education Association, 2014; Schargel, 2013), smaller class sizes (Lange & Sletten, 2002), differing instructional approaches (DeAngelis, 2012; National Alternative Education Association, 2014), and altered pacing and credit recovery (Dessoff, 2009). The NCES (2002b) defined alternative education as a program that "addresses the needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education" (p. 82). Alternative education is used as a catch-all for court schools, classes for special education students, drug rehabilitation programs, and dropout preventions programs (Aron, 2003, 2006; Flower, McDaniel, & Jolivette, 2011).

One type of alternative school that has grown since 2002 is dropout prevention schools. A strong catalyst for this growth has been the NCLB Act that was enacted in 2001. The NCLB Act requires states to issue report cards on schools. One category of the report cards is graduation rates. Dropout prevention schools and programs, of which not all have been successful (Aron, 2006), have been developed in an effort to meet the graduation requirement.

Although there are many different reasons (DeAngelis, 2012; Dessoff, 2009; Foley & Pang, 2006) for establishing alternative education programs, there are two characteristics that

seem to remain the same throughout these programs. Alternative education programs are established to serve students who are not always successful in traditional schools, also called at-risk students, and alternative education programs represent different types of environments than do traditional schools (Raywid, 1994b; Watson, 2011). The first of the two reasons for establishing alternative education is to reach unsuccessful students, including engaging unsuccessful students who may be disadvantaged, at risk, or marginalized. Unsuccessful students may also include those students with economic, emotional, or physical needs and those students with disciplinary and attendance problems. The second reason to establish alternative programs, as mentioned by Raywid (1994b) and Watson (2011), is to have alternative schools engaged in innovative and creative practices.

Types of Schools

Raywid (1994b) identified three general types of alternative programs and labeled them as Type I, Type II, and Type III. Type I seeks "to make school challenging and fulfilling for all involved" (Raywid, 1994b, p. 27). Type I schools are those that incorporate innovations and differ, both administratively and organizationally from traditional schools. Type I schools are often popular and are schools of choice. Type I schools frequently require some type of admissions interview or audition such as a magnet school for the arts. Type II schools are schools to which students are assigned, such as schools for students on legal probation (as opposed to academic probation) or disciplinary schools. Type II schools would include in-school suspension, placement for students expelled from the traditional school, and court-related schools. Type II schools are general punitive and focus on behavior modification. Type III schools are for remediation. Type III schools attempt to improve student performance and

reintegrate the student into the traditional school from whence they came. Type III schools are often tied to other programs such as after school organizations.

Type I schools. Raywid (1994b) called Type I schools, schools of choice. A school of choice is one to which the students and/or their parents must apply in order to attend. Type I schools, in addition to being schools of choice, usually have something in common or some type of theme and can include schools for pregnant and parenting students, gifted students, or magnet schools such as schools for the arts and science or technology, engineering and math (STEM) schools (Tissington, 2006). Also identified as Type I schools are some charter schools, career- and job-based schools; schools in unusual settings, such as shopping malls or museums; and some dropout prevention schools (Aron, 2003). Type I schools are generally very successful alternative schools (Aron, 2006). According to Aron (2006), Type I schools "include divergence from standard school organizational and practices; an especially caring, professional staff; small size and small classes; and a whole student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling" (p. 4).

Tissington (2006) also observed that Type I schools exist to serve special needs students. Tissington claimed that Type I schools serve students who "prior to entering the program were truant, pregnant, engaged in substance abuse, had special education needs or were in need of a gifted curriculum" (p. 21). Type I schools and programs include many of the schools originally designed for at-risk youth. They are often referred to as innovative and true educational alternatives (Aron, 2006).

An example of a Type I school would be schools or programs for pregnant and parenting students. In the 1950s, most high school students did not plan to go to college (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999). Most high school students of that era had "clearly defined career and gender

roles" (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999, p. 18). If a high school girl became pregnant, it was expected that both she and the father would drop out of school (Schnieder & Stevenson, 1999). In the late 1960s and early 1970s this attitude began to change dramatically (Turley et al., 2007). According to McLaughlin (2014), "In 1972, the Title IX Education Amendments (PL 92-318, 1972) made student pregnancy and parenthood the legal responsibility of all federally funded schools" (p. 34). As a result of Title IX programs and schools for pregnant students were developed (Berg & Nelson, 2016; McLaughlin, 2014).

Magnet schools are another Type I school. According to Smrekar and Honey (2015), "Magnet schools are public schools designed to attract parents and students through specialized curricular themes or instructional methods" (p. 128). Magnet schools are theme-based schools that cover diverse subjects. Magnet schools are also referred to as schools of choice (DeNisco, 2015; Gaztambide-Frenandez, Nicholls, & Arraiz-Matute, 2016; Smrekar & Honey, 2015) because students and parents are allowed to choose a specific school instead of being sent there based on where they live. Magnet schools have also shown higher graduation rates than traditional schools (Walker & VanderPloeg, 2015; Wang, Schweig, & Herman, 2017).

Some states have created entire schools for talented and gifted students (Walker & VanderPloeg, 2015). Virginia created the Commonwealth Governor's School "for gifted students in Grades 9 through 12 in for core subjects operated by a consortium of counties" (Walker & VanderPloeg, 2015, p. 160). One of the rationales given for creating these schools is "gifted students without access to services often become underachievers" (DeNisco, 2015, p. 43). According to the National Association for Gifted Children (2013), as of 2012, 10 states have created schools for the gifted.

Science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) schools are a Type I school that has become popular in recent years (Subotnik, Almarode, & Lee, 2016). Several STEM schools have started to incorporate art into the curriculum as a way to broaden interest and creativity in the schools (Ochterski & Lupacchino-Gilson, 2016; Sochacka, Guyotte & Walther, 2016; Tan 2017) and have adopted the acronym STEAM, which stands for science, technology, engineering, art, and math.

Type II schools. Discipline is the primary characteristic of Type II schools. Often Type II environments are programs within the traditional schools, or they may be stand-alone schools. Students do not choose to attend a Type II school; they are usually seen "as one last chance prior to expulsion" (Raywid, 1994b, p. 27). Aron (2006) found that Type II schools are punitive and the student population is considered to consist of bad students. According to Aron (2006), "The aim of Type II schools is to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students" (p. 4). Raywid (1994b) found that Type II programs are rarely successful. "Analyses showed that such programs made no difference in dropout or referral rates, corporal punishment, suspension or expulsion" (p. 28). Type II schools are usually referred to in the literature as disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEP; Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Carver et al., 2010; Herndon & Bembenutty, 2017).

Students who are placed in DAEPs are more likely to have inappropriate behavior than those without such placement (Booker & Mitchell, 2011; Carver et al., 2010; Herndon & Bembenutty, 2014, 2017). Although Rawid (1994b) found that Type II schools were rarely successful, Herndon and Bembenutty (2014) found that students could be successful provided they "had positive and supportive peers" (p. 54).

Type III schools. Type III schools have a rehabilitation/remediation emphasis. This emphasis can be for students with academic, social, or emotional rehabilitative needs (Foley & Pang, 2006; Gable, Bullock, & Evans, 2006). The goal of Type III schools is for students to return to the traditional school. Type III schools are used for a variety of reasons, but all are intended to get students back into the traditional school (Aron, 2003, 2006; Raywid, 1994b; Tissington, 2006).

Dropout Programs

Dropout prevention is an on-going concern in education throughout the United States (Cismaru & Ivan, 2016). According to Ricard and Pelletier (2016), "It is well documented that one of the most critical issues facing the educational system in North America is the problem of students who leave school before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma" (p. 32). Cismaru and Ivan (2016) stated that the dropout problem is an "issue [that] is gaining more and more attention by researchers, teachers, social works and policy makers" (p. 68). Currently, there is a nationwide dropout rate of 20% or more (Hazel et al., 2014; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Slaughter, 2009). Dropout prevention programs can be used at all levels of K-12 education (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Dropout prevention programs include individual efforts, grade-level efforts, school-wide efforts, and district-wide efforts. Many districts establish a dedicated dropout prevention school to deal with this problem. The importance of these programs has come to the forefront with the establishment of the NCLB (2002). One of the standards it established for schools to be effective is graduation rates. NCLB defined graduation rates as "the percentage of students who graduate from secondary school with a regular diploma in the standard number of years" (NCLB, 2002, §1111). As a result of the requirement to track

dropouts, more states have looked to dropout prevention programs in an effort to boost graduation rates.

Dropout prevention schools and programs have grown considerably since 1984 (Lehr, Tan, & Ysslerdyke, 2009). A strong catalyst for the growth of dropout prevention programs has been the NCLB Act, enacted in 2001. This Act requires states to issue report cards on schools. One category considered is graduation rates. Different research has shown that school system innovation will help (Renzulli, Barr, & Paino, 2015). Dropout prevention schools or programs are viewed as innovative because they "specialize in the populations served, curricula utilized or educational foci" (Renzulli et al., 2015, p. 84), and they have been developed to help meet this requirement. While no single factor can predict if a student will dropout (Bowers, Sprott, & Taff, 2013; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015), there are several factors that can be attributed to successful alternative schools or programs.

Successful Alternative Schools and Programs

Current literature identifies several traits or characteristics of successful alternative education programs (Aron, 2003, 2006; Aron & Zweig, 2003; Raywid, 1994b; Shannon & Bylsma, 2005; Smink, 2009; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Raywid's (1994b) list provides a synthesis of all current recommendations and is often cited in literature. According to Raywid (1994b), successful alternative schools have 11 characteristics in common and they are listed and explained in the following paragraphs.

Almost all successful alternative programs began as small programs or as mini-schools within larger schools (Foley & Pang, 2006; Gilson, 2006; Raywid, 1994b; Raywid & Libby, 2000). Small schools have been recognized by many studies as generally more successful than large high schools (Feldman, 2010; Raywid, 2002; "Small High Schools," 2015; Stiefel,

Schwartz, & Wiswall, 2015). Small schools are more effective dealing with students than large schools because small schools create conditions for powerful approaches to teaching and learning (Feldman, 2010). Additionally, Stiefel et al. (2015) suggested small schools improved outcomes for "all types of schools: large, small, continuously operating, and new. Small school reform lifted all boats" (p. 161). There are, however, a few studies that suggest that while small schools lower the dropout rate, they do not significantly improve overall achievement (Barrow, Schanzenback, & Classent, 2015; Schwartz, Stiefel, & Wisall, 2016).

The literature indicates that successful alternative programs were designed by the people that ended up operating those schools (Gilson, 2006; Raywid, 1994b). For example, Louis, Kruse, and Raywid (1996) said, "Principals and school leaders who are effective at creating schools that are continually learning together facilitate debate and reflective dialogue among faculty members" (p. 21). Louis et al. (1996) noted the ideas and characteristics of the teachers who started and subsequently joined the program were key to the school's success. "They took their character, theme, or emphasis from the strengths and interests of the teachers who conceived them" (Raywid, 1994a, p. 28). New staff members were chosen with input from the existing staff (Gilson, 2006; Raywid, 1994b, 2002).

Teachers were not just assigned to the schools; they applied and were selected to work in the program (Foran, 2015; Raywid, 1994b). Feldman (2010) also felt teachers should apply for specific schools, not just to become teachers in a district. Teachers in alternative school settings should choose the school whenever possible (Feldman, 2010). In addition, Foran (2015) explained that teachers should not be forced into these positions in alternative education schools because of lack of seniority. Foran (2015) continued by stating, "Like the students, all teachers and support staff chose to be a part of it [the alternative school staff]" (p. 6).

Successful alternative schools are schools of choice (Raywid, 1994b). "Parents want to be able to choose a school that best matches the needs of their child and their own values" (Pandel, 2015, p. 39). Schools of choice are usually more successful than schools based solely on geographical location (Kesten, 2010; Machin & Salvanes, 2016; Pandel, 2015)

Still another characteristic of successful alternative schools is that the founding principal/director is also a teacher in the newly founded alternative program (Raywid, 1994a). Referring to a school in Colorado, Raywid (1995) stated, "the foundresses sit as the nucleus of a steering committee" (p. 558) that also includes staff, students, and parents. When a founding director is also a teacher in the program, it tends to build collegiality from the beginning (Louis et al., 1996; Raywid, 1994b, 1995).

Because they are small, successful alternative schools do not have all the amenities of a larger school such as libraries, counselors, and deans (Raywid, 1994a). Raywid (1994a) feels that eliminating some of the amenities is beneficial to alternative programs. "By virtually eliminating nonteaching personnel, alternative schools . . . are able to reduce class size considerably, without major increases in the student-to-adult ratio" (Raywid, 1994a, p. 96).

Because successful alternative schools are protected from the district bureaucracy by the superintendent of schools, have little of the slow-moving district bureaucratic interference, as mentioned below. Successful alternative schools also have strong continuity of leadership (Raywid, 1994b). According to Raywid (1992), modern school districts have become so bureaucratic that the relationship between alternative schools and the bureaucracy has become such an adversarial relationship that it "makes education all but impossible to conduct" (p. 115). Additionally, Greany and Waterhouse (2016) said that school autonomy along with giving

parents a choice in the school "will free schools up from the slow-moving bureaucracies" (p. 1190).

In addition to the 11 characteristics cited above, Raywid (1994b) cited "three sets of factors [that] appear to account for the success of alternative schools" (p. 29). The first two were identified by Wehlage et al. (1989) in an earlier study and confirmed by Raywid (1994b); the third is a result of Raywid's (1994b) own work. According to Raywid (1994b), first "schools generate and sustain community within them. Second, they make learning engaging. And third, they provide the school organization and structure needed to sustain the first two" (p. 29). Of the three factors, all require strong leadership to create a culture where those factors can thrive. The first factor includes such ideas as membership, ownership, teacher-student interactions, and school culture. The second factor identifies compelling, rigorous curriculum; innovative and cross-curricular teaching, and experiential learning. The final factor is focused on elements that allow the first two factors to continue over time such as expanded staff roles, school culture, student scheduling, and decision-making within the school. These three factors tend to overlap with each other; for example, teacher-student interactions are critical in establishing ownership and school culture. Innovative and cross-curricular teaching affects student scheduling and staff roles, all of which are inclusive in school culture. Rutledge et al. (2015) identified six components of effective schools. Those six components include quality instruction, rigorous and aligned curriculum, personalized learning connections, culture of learning and professional behavior, connections to external communities, and learning-centered leadership (Rutledge et al., 2015) and all fall neatly within the three factors identified by Raywid (1994b) and Wehlege et al. (1989). Of the 11 characteristics of successful alternative schools that Raywid (1994b) identified, two were directly aimed at leadership.

The first factor. The first factor in successful alternative schools, according to Raywid (1994b), is the ability to create and sustain community. There are several characteristics of schools that generate and sustain community. These characteristics include membership, caring places, places thought of as family-like, building community, and strong teacher-student interactions (Barile et al., 2012; Daggett, 2015; Garza et al., 2013; Louis et al., 2016; Murphy & Torres, 2014; Quin, 2017; Rutledge et al., 2015; Wilkins, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). Wehlage et al. (1989) referred to this relationship-building as bonding or social bonding and forming attachments. Regarding the difficulty students have when they are unable to bond or form attachments, Wehlage et al. stated, "When students have low attachment to teachers and administrators it is easy to feel rejected by the school and, in turn, to justify rejecting the school" (p. 117). Barile et al. (2012) indicated that when schools work to have appropriate teacher–student relationships they have higher graduation rates. Wilkins and Bost (2016) stated, "When students feel little attachment to school, it is usually not a difficult decision for them to drop out" (p. 272). In addition, Sulkowski et al. (2012) explained that when students do not become engaged in school, millions of students are affected. Because of this lack of engagement, "efforts to connect students to schools should be at the forefront of current initiatives to improve education" (Sulkowski et al., 2012, p. 1). Finally, Quin (2017) stated that when teachers do not engage students there are indirect "effects on dropout, via low academic grades, peer rejection, and diminished academic aspirations" (p. 373).

Discussing the importance of teacher-child relationships in successful student, O'Connor and McCartney (2007) reported three main findings. First, there is a strong positive relationship between appropriate teacher-child relationships and student achievements. Second, strong teacher-child relationships buffered the students from negative effects of insecurity on

achievement. Finally, strong teacher-student relationships improve behaviors in the classroom, which enhances achievement. Also, Aarela, Maatta, and Uusiautti (2016) stated that students who had "experiences [with] teachers who care and help made them [students] work harder at school" (p. 12).

One of the keys to teacher-student success has been the systematic approach of individual caring shown toward the students. "Personalizing the learning environment through small classes is another way that teachers can develop close relationships with students and help them feel a sense of community in school" (Wilkins & Bost, 2016, p. 271). Such individual attention has been shown to improve school performance (Daggett, 2015; Hazel et al., 2014; Rutledge et al., 2015; Schargel & Smink, 2001). Students, especially at-risk students, crave attention and love (Aarela et al., 2016). One of the reasons gangs are so successful is that they provide imitation love. They tell young people they are family, you can always count on them, and that they will always be there for you. That is exactly what at-risk kids want: someone to be there, someone to care. Brentro and Seita (2005) stated, "there is reason for hope. Research shows that inclusive schools and caring communities can develop strengths in all our children" (p. 153). Additionally, Garza et al. (2013) stated that when school leaders have a "clear sense of direction and purpose for their school [they were able to] galvanize the support of the school community behind [them]" (p. 799). Rutledge et al. (2015) stated that when there is a strong teacher-student relationship in which "teachers and students know each other well and adults express care and concern for student . . . student engagement is enhanced" (pp. 1063–1064). Other researchers also found that strong teacher-student relationships improve engagement (Maatta & Uusiautti, 2012; Quin, 2017). "Eventually, preventing students from dropping out of school is a matter of small, intentional, and timely acts" (Aarela et al., 2016, p. 15).

The scriptures are replete with admonitions to love others with a Godly love. Indeed, Jesus said the first commandment is to love Him "and the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39, KJV). Jesus also taught about the importance of the one recovered or reclaimed soul. Three specific parables include the parable of the lost sheep, the parable of the lost coin, and the parable of the prodigal son. "Children who are spiritually empty cannot stand the quiet because they do not want to be alone with their thoughts. They attempt to cover the emptiness with noise and wild celebration" (Larson & Brendtro, 2000, p. 16). It is critical that educators make every effort to reclaim the prodigal sons and daughters of our educational system (Larson & Brendtro, 2000) then, as Jesus said, "It was meet that we should make merry, and be glad: for this thy brother was dead, and is alive again; and was lost, and is found" (Luke 15:32, KJV).

There have been many books and articles on personal relationships between students and teachers (Daggett, 2015; Noddings, 1984). Covey (1989) stressed the importance of relationships in building win-win situations. "Without trust, the best we can do is compromise; without trust, we lack the credibility for open, mutual learning and communication and real creativity" (p. 220). Referring to the leader of a highly successful program, Garza et al. (2013) said that she "manifested a genuine sense of care that helped to form meaningful relationships among all the stakeholders in the school community" (p. 806).

Building relationships with students is not a new idea. In a book written by G. Samuel Hall in 1829, *Lectures on School Keeping:*

> If you succeed in gaining their love, your influence will be greater in some respects that that of parents themselves. It will be in your power to direct them into almost any path you choose. . . . You have the power to make them kind, benevolent and humane, or, by

> your neglect they may become the reverse of everything that is lovely, amiable and generous. (p. 47)

Schools cannot afford to neglect the spirits and souls of their students. "Supportive environments are a very important part of the school climate. This [a supportive environment] will allow students to work more closely with their teachers, develop relationships, and create climates which do not alienate students" (Duhon, 1997, p. 35). In a report on at-risk migrant students, Gibson and Bejinez (2002) stated "we found caring relationships between migrant staff and students to be at the very heart of the program's success" (p. 159).

Fay and Funk (1995) discussed rules of the psychology of self-concept. One of those rules suggests that people will perform for those they love. If they have healthy self-esteem, they will work for themselves, but if not, they will work for someone they love or respect until their own self-esteem improves. "A student with such a self-concept will most likely do school assignments when doing them for someone he or she loves" (p. 20). Fay and Funk went on to describe what they called "love and logic techniques" and how their techniques are "based on research that shows that a student's improved behavior or cooperation can be traced and linked to the personal connection he/she developed with a special adult" (p. 22).

Glasser (1993) stated, "When anyone works hard for another person . . . the amount of effort they put out depends to a great extent on: 1. How well they know the person they are working for. 2. How much they like what they know" (p. 30). In addition to liking who they work with, students need to be able to trust their teachers. Covey (1989) mentioned the importance of trust and stated, "Without trust, the best we can do is compromise; without trust, we lack the credibility for open, mutual learning and communication and real creativity" (p. 221). When students trust their teachers, and know that their teachers care about them, then "you

have the power to make…them kind, benevolent and humane, or, by your neglect they may become the reverse of everything that is lovely, amiable, and generous" (Hall, 1829, p. 47).

Fay and Funk (1995) stated, "I've got to get them to fall in love with me so deeply that they will do things for me that they would not do for anybody else—including themselves" (p. 312). It is a good thing to tell a child you care. Several studies have shown that students who have a quality teacher–student relationship are more successful and more likely to stay in school (Brentro et al., 1990; Daggett, 2015; DeAngelis, 2012; Duhon, 1997; Fay & Funk, 1995; Hall, 1829; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). "All teachers stated that students talked to them in nonacademic contexts and that these informal teacher talks signified good relationships" (Wilkins, 2014, p. 63).

When people feel they are important and cared about, they start to care about themselves and others (Noddings, 1984). Linvill (2014) stated, "Increasing student engagement requires meaningful effort on the part of both the instructor and the student" (p. 205). Many of the most difficult students simply have a protective shell around a damaged, tender soul. Covey (1989) stated, "We encourage obedience to the laws of life when we live the laws of love. People are extremely tender inside, particularly those who act as if they are tough and self-sufficient" (p. 122). Getting students to open up just a little bit may be a pathway to success. Teachers and school administrators are an important part of this process and must exhibit the types of behavior that will allow students to feel secure. Palmer (2017) stated, "When we are willing to abandon our self-protective professional autonomy and make ourselves as dependent on our students as they are on us, we move closer to the interdependence that the community of truth requires" (p. 144).

Several other educators echo this concept and express this belief. Lantiera and Patti (1996) believed that the ability to turn schools into caring communities rather than armed fortresses will determine the future of young people. Larson and Brendtro (2005) stated, "There is reason for hope. Research shows that inclusive schools and caring communities can develop strengths in all our children" (p. 153). Garza et al. (2013) discussing principal leadership that sustained success, commented on the importance of leaders building community, "Another important dimension was building community. These principals reached out to their communities. They clearly understood that they could not succeed in isolation" (p. 798). Finally, Garza et al. (2013) noted that in successful schools, parents felt like they were invited into the school at any time, students displayed good feelings about themselves, and teachers felt like they were appreciated and supported.

In addition to a foundational, nurturing teacher–student relationship, successful students take responsibility for their learning, performance, and resulting outcomes. As students begin to develop strength, they can begin to accept ownership for their education. Before students can feel ownership, they need to believe in themselves. As Kozacek and Specht (2016) stated, "We need to start with building self-efficacy before we can focus on self-advocacy" (p. 6). Self-efficacy is a student's confidence in his/her own abilities to complete a task (D. T. Conley & French, 2014; Kozacek & Specht, 2016). As they develop self-advocacy, students start to take ownership of their education. High performing schools work with students to develop student ownership (Nakkula, 2012; Rutledge & Cannata, 2016). Nakkula (2012) said that students are more successful when they have an authentic voice; "a voice that tells the student this motivation is mine, this engagement comes from me, these accomplishments are of my own direction and making" (p. 63). When student feel that they are in control of the goals and work they tend to be

more successful (Chan, Graham-Day, Ressa, Peters, & Konrad, 2014; J. S. Lee, 2012; Nakkula, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). J. S. Lee (2012) stated, "student engagement is a robust predictor of student success at school" (p. 331). Additionally, Sulkowski et al. (2012) stated that when teachers and leaders listen to students, both "schools and lives can be transformed by efforts to listen to and deeply connect with students" (p. 21). When students are engaged, they tend to take learning beyond the classroom and into their world. According to R. Jackson and Zmuda (2014), when students are engaged, they "often pursue their own train of thought about the topic under study, regardless of the task at hand" (p. 19) and "take risks; they're not afraid to try something new" (p. 22). Still another way of building ownership is through learning communities which are also referred to as cohorts (Pike, Kuh, & Mccormick, 2010; Price, 2005). Cohorts can provide common learning opportunities to the members of the cohort (Mertler, 2016). Pike et al. (2010) found that cohort "membership was consistently and positively related to engagement and learning outcomes" (p. 303).

The second factor. According to Raywid (1994b), the second factor of successful alternative schools is that they "make learning engaging" (p. 29). Much of the focus in this factor is the emphasis on engaging, innovative, and compelling curriculum. "Teaching methods can be the greatest factor in changing students' graduation rates in alternative schools" (Izumi et al., 2013, p. 311). If high schools wish to promote positive and lasting change, they must focus on structural changes and how they deliver a rigorous, engaging curriculum (Hazel et al., 2014; Hong, 2012; Izumi et al., 2013; Scogin, 2016). The second factor spends a lot of energy on making the learning more experiential and less dependent on books. According to Sliwka (2008), "A noticeable commonality between most alternative schools is their attempt to teach an integrated curriculum that does not strictly separate traditional subject areas but rather

emphasizes the interconnections between the disciplines" (p. 112). To accommodate the integrated curriculum, teachers helped motivate students by providing them "more freedom, challenging students to take projects deeper, encouraging, and scaffolding" (Scogin, 2016, p. 375). Many authors have linked innovative classroom instruction to success in preventing dropouts (DeAngelis, 2012; Cook, 2013; Hong, 2012; Rutledge et al., 2015; Scogin, 2016). Zyngier (2017) stated, "Engagement in school, or student engagement is often cited as an essential component of programmatic interventions for students at risk" (p. 13).

There has been a great deal of research on the concept of engagement since the mid-1990s (Fredricks, Filsecker, & Lawson, 2016; Hazel et al., 2014; Hong, 2012; Izumi et al., 2013; Scogin, 2016). It is of great interest because of the "potential in addressing persistent educational problems such as low achievement, high dropout rates, and high rates of student boredom and alienation" (Fredricks et al., 2016, p. 2)

According to Laxman (2013), "inquiry-based learning as an education process of active learning encouraged students to discover new knowledge on their own and enhanced their problem-solving abilities" (p. 42). A key part of engaging, innovative, and compelling curriculum is getting students to buy-in to the curriculum or develop ownership. When students develop ownership for the curriculum, greater learning occurs (Chan et al., 2014; D. T. Conley & French, 2014; Hazel, Vazirabadi, & Gallagher, 2013; Hong, 2012; Kozacek & Specht, 2015; Laxman, 2013; Nakkula, 2012; Rutledge & Cannata, 2016; Wynn & Harris, 2012; Yonezawa et al., 2012). When students are engaged, they are more persistent, work harder, are more likely to pursue original work, and create work of a higher level than if they are not engaged (Chan et al. 2014; D. T. Conley & French, 2014; Kozacek & Specht, 2015; Laxman, 2013; Yonezawa et al., 2012). Laxman (2013) stated, "It was found that by encouraging students to craft questions and

seek answers to the questions, students showed greater enthusiasm and excitement in their learning" (p. 54). According to D. T. Conley and French (2014), students "are more likely to complete complex assignments, solve problems that require persistence, and create original or novel work of high quality" (p. 1019). D. T. Conley and French (2014) also suggested that student ownership can compensate somewhat for less effective teachers. When "students owned the experiment . . . they were empowered to ask questions, design experiments to answer those questions, and ultimately evaluate their own projects" (D. T. Conley & French, 2014, p. 1019).

Another element that has shown success is having students engage in self-evaluation of the products of their academic efforts. Chan et al. (2014) also pointed out the benefits for students to be involved in self-evaluation of their work. "When students collect evidence of their learning, they experience the ownership and excitement of monitoring their achievement and growth" (p. 108). It is also helpful to include multiple evaluation tools "which include drawing, operas, sailing, narrative local tourist spot, and searching information by mobile technology, liberates students' imaginations" (P. C. Lee, Lin, & Kang, 2015, p. 505).

In addition to improving academic performance, research shows that when students develop ownership the teacher–student relationship also changes. According to Hong (2012), teachers do not instruct the "students because the primary purpose of these courses is to develop students' self-directed learning and team-work skills. Therefore, the teachers remain as a facilitator, and it is the students who have ownership throughout the whole process (p. 31). D. T. Conley and French (2014) found that when students begin to demonstrate ownership of their learning, they are successful in other learning environments. Students are able to succeed in "large classes and online courses where they have less interaction with the instructor" (D. T. Conley & French, 2014, p. 1018). Johnson, Kraft, and Papay (2012) stated that principals and

teachers have to be able to work together in schools and unless teachers and principals "work together to build a school culture that supports good instruction, the much-sought-after gains in student learning will not be realized" (p. 32).

As students get more and more involved with their own instruction, they get more motivated. According to Louis et al. (2016), "Joint ownership, responsibility, and accountability may motivate action on others' behalf in part because one's own success is tied up in the success of others'" (p. 318). As students become more engaged and active in the planning process, "there will be an enhanced motivation by placing greater responsibility and ownership on the students" (Watson, 2011, p. 1518). Some schools incorporate e-learning to enhance their curriculum and make it more appealing to students (Jamaludin & Hung, 2016; E. A. Jackson, 2017). According to P. C. Lee et al. (2015), "It is well-known amongst students that the traditional teaching approach is dull and boring compared to the feelings of excitement the cyber world brings to learners" (p. 492). Tyler and Perez (2015) pointed out that students in today's electronic society "require the utilization of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities via independent, online and accelerated learning opportunities" (p. 28). Eventually students will reach a point where they may develop their own instructional plans. Kallick and Zmuda (2017) stated, "In student-generated instructional plans, students work at their own pace" (p. 56). Students need to feel they are directly responsible for their own success. According to Nakkula (2012), "They require Authentic Voice, a voice that tells the student this motivation is mine, this engagement comes from me" (p. 60). As this sense of community and belonging in the school grows, students' ownership grows as well (Louis et al., 2016; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Riley, Ellis, Weinstock, Tarrant & Hallmond, 2006). According to Goodenow (1993), "Belonging

could be the single most crucial factor in the motivation and engagement of certain categories of at-risk students" (p. 39).

The third factor. The third factor of successful alternative schools, according to Raywid (1994b), is the ability to sustain the first two factors over time. This factor involves what is known as the school's culture which flows from the degree of teacher and staff engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment. Components of sustainability are: broadening staff roles, creating culture in the school, and having collaboration between teachers and students (Louis et al., 2016; Raywid, 1994b; Tichnor-Wagner, Harrison, & Cohen-Vogels, 2016; Watson, 2011). According to Raywid (1994b), when staff are given new responsibilities, allowed to make crucial education decisions, and "schedules are changed, the school's social order becomes dependent on norms rather than on rules, and far more collaborative effort occurs among both students and staff than in other schools" (p. 27). The changing of schedules, social order, and collaboration are referred to as a school's culture (Louis et al., 2016; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016; Watson, 2011).

Kouzes and Posner (2002) found that "employees are more loyal when they believe that their values and those of the organization are aligned. They are more creative because they become immersed in what they are doing" (p. 78). The more strongly a person identifies with the culture of an organization the more likely they are going to be successful, productive employees. Applebaum, Karasek, Lapointe, and Quelch (2015) stated, "A team based structure and a culture based on trust and open communication are the key factors affecting the successful implementation of empowerment" (p. 23). Johnson et al. (2012) found that social conditions were a strong predictor of teacher satisfaction and commitment to a school: "Teachers are more satisfied and plan to stay longer in schools that have a positive work context, independent of the school's demographic characteristics" (p. 3). In addition, Hulpia, Devos, and Rosseel (2009)

stated that school leaders displaying a cohesiveness and providing strong support for the teaching staff "are the most important variables associated with organizational commitment and job satisfaction" (p. 308).

An administration's basic value system and the principles it adheres to are key to how its culture is established and its policies are executed. Some of the most notable, powerful, and successful people in history have based their successes on very different value systems and principles related to how to treat other people. For example, Machiavelli (1532/2004) stated that the way to be successful is by cunning and wiles: "Men by their cunning have accomplished great things, and in the end got the better of those who trusted to honest dealings" (p. 83). In direct contrast to Machiavelli's thoughts are a number of other belief systems including Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, and Zoroastrianism. Christ said, "And as ye would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise" (Luke 6:31, KJV). Almost every culture and century has said something similar. The conflicting messages between Machiavelli and these other leaders can best be reconciled by looking at the leadership systems that are best to use in education.

Machiavelli (1532/2004) approached leadership from the view that leadership was inherited, must be kept by strength and cunning. During Machiavelli's life, most power was inherited because of who one was. If the leader did not exhibit strength and cunning, he would likely be challenged and overthrown by someone of greater strength or cunning. Owens (1995) said of Machiavelli's book, *The Prince*, that it "once was required reading for students in educational administration and is still widely admired today" (p. 122). In today's world, learning organizations should strive to develop collegial relationships with the staff. Learning organizations need to have three foundations. First, they need a culture based on love, wonder,

humility, and compassion (Fay & Funk, 1995; Louis et al. 2016). Second, they need to have practices in place that generate conversations and team action (Daggett, 2015; Garza et al., 2014). Third, they need to be able to adapt to the flow of the organization (Feldman, 2010; Garza et al., 2014; Greany & Waterhouse, 2016).

Lao Tzu stated that "Enlightened leadership is service, not selfishness. The leader grows more and lasts longer by placing the well-being of all above the well-being of self alone" (Heider, 1985, p. 13). Within this statement is the understanding that a leader must understand the reality of a situation not just the way he or she hopes things are. If a leader does not fully understand what is real, he or she cannot provide selfless service. Machiavelli (1534/2004) stated that it is essential to good leadership to know what one's followers want and try to meet those needs. The difference between Machiavelli and Lao Tzu are the methods each advocated in meeting the needs of those one leads.

Tate (2003) stated, "Traditional, top-down visions often fail because of the leader's unwillingness to recognize the personal visions of those being led" (p. 33). DePree (1989) agreed that it is essential to recognize the vision of those being led and explained that companies with strong employee stock ownership programs flourished because it made essential an "employee and owner at every position" (p. 97). Again, it is vital that a leader recognizes what is really going on in an organization, not just what they think is happening or what they want to be happening (Daggett, 2015; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Sagnak, 2012).

One of the best ways to make sure the leadership knows what is going on is to ensure that they have an empowered staff (Applebaum et al., 2015; Sagnak, 2012). An empowered staff encourages staff members to take chances and improve the overall program. Empowerment creates many positive outcomes. For example, empowerment improves teacher quality and the

desire to innovate increases, as does the staff's job satisfaction and commitment to the program (A. N. Lee & Nie, 2014). Teacher empowerment, in turn, can improve student improvement and overall effectiveness (Garza et al., 2013; Hulpia et al., 2009; A. N. Lee & Nie, 2014; J. C. Lee et al., 2013; Sagnak, 2012; Tannehill & MacPhail, 2016; Vecchio et al., 2010). Conversely, Conger and Kanungo (1988) stated, "any strategy that weakens the self-determination need or self-efficacy belief of employees will increase their feelings of powerlessness" (p. 471). Garza et al. (2013) stated that one particular principal "relied on many in the school to improve instruction, and, in reality, relied on everyone—students, teachers, and parents—pulling in the same direction to effect improvement" (p. 800).

School leadership is important in developing collaboration and creativity in curriculla. According to Greany and Waterhouse (2016), "It would appear that leadership agency by principals and their professional teams is more important than policy freedoms for securing curriculum innovation" (p. 1189). Min et al. (2016) noted the quality of instruction is strongly enhanced by school leadership and observed that teachers believe successful school leadership provides collaboration and opportunities to share strategies and expertise. Strong and effective leaders also understand that both rigor and nurture are important is student learning. According to Louis et al. (2016), "Student learning requires both a strong sense of academic press and a powerful sense of community for students, teachers and families" (p. 311).

Researchers note that when teachers are empowered, schools improve. "There is a broad consensus among scholars and practitioners that teacher empowerment . . . is a consistent characteristic of high-performing schools" (Paulsen, Hjerto, & Tihverainen, 2016, p. 756). Scholars suggest that when teachers feel empowered, they are also more likely to stay in a particular school. According to Paulsen et al. (2016), "Our results confirm that effective

principal practices promoting teacher empowerment is an integrated practice, drawing on more the one leadership model" (p. 764).

Successful and effective alternative schools develop a strong school culture that includes teacher–teacher collaboration, teacher–student collaboration, social order based on norms, and creative class scheduling (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2011; Murphy & Tobin, 2011; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016; Watson, 2011). A strong and positive school culture creates a caring attitude among all participants. According to Louis et al. (2016), "A caring organizational culture requires a density of interactions that may create the basis for trust and reciprocity more broadly" (p. 336). Teachers in successful alternative schools collaborate with each other on a regular basis. Louis et al. (1996) stated, "By emphasizing needed changes in the culture of schools and the daily practice of professionals, the reform movement can concentrate on the heart of the school—the teaching and learning process" (p. 9). When teachers are allowed time to collaborate, they create a more effective curriculum that is based on the students they teach. Louis et al. (1996) also stated, "principals and school leaders who are effective at creating schools that are continually learning together facilitate debate and reflective dialogue among faculty members. Reflection upon practice can serve to transform the members of a community into knowledge generators themselves" (p. 15).

Izumi et al. (2013) found that "school staffing can be a key factor for improving education in alternative schools specifically for at-risk students" (p. 318). When teachers collaborate with students rather than simply instruct, student learning is improved. According to Quinn et al. (2006), "The quality of teacher-student interaction is a salient issue raised in existing research on alternative education" (p. 15). Teachers and students are, however, human, and as such not everyone gets along or connects with each other. Watson (2011) found that "different

students identified more with different staff members, but the common theme was that students felt a strong connection with the staff" (p. 1512). Teacher–student collaboration increases the level of participation of students. Students feel valued and are not afraid to speak up in class. According to Maatta and Usuiautti (2012), "Pedagogical love as a method of good teacherhood means inherent trust in students' learning, their often hidden and dormant talents and possibilities. A good teacher helps students to see the dimensions of their own development" (p. 25). Classrooms are "inclusive, all individuals' comments and ideas were valued and respected, contributions from all students were expected" (Bennett, 2014, p. 21). Bennett (2014) stated that "Teachers must first fulfill roles in creating a classroom culture that promotes the type of discourse in which the teacher can act as a facilitator" (p. 24). Strong teacher–student collaboration can also create a culture of participation and learning. Maatta and Uusianutti (2012) stated, "Good teaching necessitates live interaction and the ability to place oneself in an interacting relationship with students" (p. 22).

In schools that have a strong culture of participation and learning, students "are encouraged to adopt an academic focus and to take responsibility for their own learning" (Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016, p. 607). Teachers also need to be flexible and "willing to adapt lesson plans to personalize learning" (Miller, 2015, p. 25). In successful alternative schools, individual lesson planning places a premium on teacher and student interactions. Teachers in successful alternative schools are also cognizant of personal student learning styles. These personalized lesson plans clearly increase student ownership (Watson, 2011). Watson (2011) explained that the process of individual personalized lesson plans "was clearly enhancing motivation by placing responsibility and ownership on the students" (p. 1507).

A part of the culture of participation and learning is helping students understand that mistakes are part of growth. Miller (2015) stated, "We must embrace the cognitive dissonance and accept that mistakes and confusion will litter the path to knowledge production" (p. 27). Strong teacher–student collaboration can also help develop a social order based on norms and can help develop unique schedules for students.

According to Raywid (1995), "The staff is not satisfied when a student fulfills expectation obediently but perfunctorily. There is an emphasis on the student as a person and on personal and social development as well as intellectual development" (p. 560). Students will feel more connected and more likely to engage in a school where order is based on norms instead of rules. Maatta and Usuiautti (2012) stated, "The purpose of the learning relationship is to make the pupil develop into an independent and responsible autonomous individual. However, the student does not achieve this goal alone; they need the educator's help and guidance" (p. 26). Maatta and Uusiautti are not the only researchers who found that achieving a school order based on norms required modeling by staff. Kock, Taconi, Bolhuis, and Gravemeijer (2014) said, "Changing the classroom culture requires a change of norms, values, expectations and behaviors. The teacher can facilitate this change by . . . modeling behaviors in accordance with these norms" (p. 47). Interestingly, Watson (2011) found that one characteristic of successful alternative school culture was a resistance toward authority, not just by the students but also by the staff. Watson noted students' resistance to authority and stated, "The students were not the only ones who showed resistance toward authority. It was not too hard to see that the staff were also resistant to authority or being told what to do" (p. 1516).

Research indicates this culture of order by norms also contributes to creative scheduling (Foran, 2015; Raywid, 2001; Watson, 2011). Most schools have set periods, days, pacing of

curriculum and the progressive order of the curriculum (Foran, 2015; Raywid, 2001; Watson, 2011). Alternative schools generally have more flexibility in the area of class scheduling. Raywid (2006) stated, "How can we group students in ways that will be democratic? One of the soundest answers seems to be grouping them according to their interests" (p. 654). Several researchers have cited that flexible grouping and flexible scheduling have been among the keys to success in an alternative school setting (Foran, 2015; Raywid, 2001; Watson, 2011). For example, Foran (2015) cited scheduling as one of the reasons for success at his school: "We use a five-day block scheduling with all classes meeting about twice as long as those at our comprehensive high school" (p. 7).

In addition to creative scheduling for school hours, the culture of creative scheduling allows for creating scheduling centered around students' needs. Watson (2011) stated that students had to come to school a set number of hours each day, within the hours the school was open, but the student could choose those hours as long as they coordinated it with the teachers. Furthermore, Watson (2011) stated students could move forward in the curriculum at their own pace, moving forward "as soon as they master the current [lesson], and although each student must reach mastery level before moving on, students also do not need to wait for others" (p. 1518).

Summary

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand the impact of a school leader on the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Current literature has indicated that alternative education should continue to be an issue for school districts in the future. Spurred on by legal requirements, school districts are likely to continue searching for ways to keep students in school and progressing toward

graduation. Subsequently, dropout prevention programs are going to continue to be a key element in finding ways to meet requirements for high school graduation.

The literature provides many examples of successful alternative education programs. In addition, there have been many studies that examine effective strategies for preventing student dropout. However, there is very little research into individual successful dropout prevention programs and even though leadership is an important aspect of successful dropout prevention programs, there have been limited studies on the impact of leadership on specific successful programs.

It is essential that school districts understand and allow for the leadership elements and factors that make up successful alternative education programs that provide the foundation for successful dropout prevention programs. With this knowledge, school districts can develop successful alternative school leaders and successful dropout prevention schools. Understanding how a school leader establishes policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program will help other districts develop successful leaders for similar programs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Successful dropout prevention programs are defined as programs that improve on the national dropout average of 80% (Izumi et al., 2013). Chapter Three of the present study includes discussion of the design, site, and participants involved in this study. In addition, the procedures, my role as the researcher, data collection methods, and data analysis tools are explained. Finally, the chapter will examine the trustworthiness of the study and the ethical considerations that were applied to the research.

Design

This qualitative study used a single instrumental case study approach. According to Creswell (2013), a case study has several defining features, including "a case that has unusual interest in and of itself and need to be described and detailed" (p. 98). A case study design was used for this study because the study phenomenon represents a unique situation that deserves to be looked at in depth (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 1998, Stake, 1995). Yin (2014) also pointed out examples of case study methods involving programs with at-risk youth. Because dropouts are considered to be at-risk youth, a case study method was an acceptable method. Creswell (2013) stated that in a single instrumental case study, "the researcher focuses on an issue or concern and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue" (p. 98). The purpose of this current case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Futhermore, Hancock and Algozzine (2015) stated, "Case study research typically focuses on an individual representative of a group (e. g., a school

administrator)" (p. 15). According to Stake (1995), "for the most part, the cases of interest in education and social service are people and programs" (p. 1). Therefore, because this present study was focused on a unique situation and involved school administrators and at-risk students, the single instrumental case study approach was the best method for this research.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program?

Research Subquestions

SQ1: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader nurtures a sense of community that fosters success in a dropout prevention program?

SQ2: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader cultivates an environment that enables teachers to develop creative, engaging, and innovative curricula?

SQ3: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops teacher leaders?

Setting

This study took place in a city in Texas where the VADP is located. The VADP was established with an innovative school grant from the state education agency and the Education Economic Policy Center; the Academy first opened on September 16, 1991. When the VADP opened, it had a total staff of seven people, including the director, a counselor, three teachers, a front office secretary, and a custodian serving 32 students. Under the terms of the initial grant, the VADP student population was to be made up of students over the age 18 who had been out of

school 2 or more years, who resided within the boundaries of the district, and who lacked fewer than four credits needed for graduation. Over the years, the VADP has evolved and had many changes to its program; for example, the VADP added a general education diploma (GED) program in 1997 and then later dropped the program when the district established a stand-alone GED program. The VADP held its first graduation in May 1992 with 24 graduates. Since then, the VADP has had over 6,000 graduates and holds graduation exercises each year in December and June.

Students at the VADP come from the 17 traditional high schools of the school district in which the Academy is located. Students at the VADP have either dropped out of school or are at risk of dropping out. Their traditional high school counselors refer these students to attend the VADP. The VADP counselor interviews the students to determine if the VADP is the best placement for these students or if another placement would be more successful for the student. If the student is to attend the VADP, they are scheduled for a 4-day orientation program. All students start the VADP with this 4-day orientation. The district in which the VADP is located has approximately 7% African American students, 28% Caucasian students, 58% Hispanic students, and approximately 7% other ethnicities. The VADP student body closely follows these demographics.

Teachers at the VADP are usually selected from experienced teachers within the district. There are currently 13 teachers, including two teachers for each of the core classes plus a computer teacher, a teacher who teaches both Spanish and art, and an additional teacher, certified in both English and social studies. Teachers at the VADP have an average of 14 years' teaching experience. The VADP has 13 fulltime teachers and two teacher aides. Teacher demographics

include 10 female and three male teachers, with nine Caucasian teachers, three Hispanic teachers, and one African American teacher.

Since opening in 1995, the VADP has continued to grow both in staff size and in student population. Since its inception, it has been housed separately from other schools in the district, encompassing five different locations and currently occupies its own building at a central location within the district. At the time of the study, the VADP staff consisted of a director, assistant director, counselor, 13 teachers, two teaching assistants, and five support staff members. Supporting the VADP mission is an Academy Advisory Corporate Council (AACC). The AACC consists of business and community leaders, Academy parents, Academy staff, district staff, current students, and alumni of the Academy. Members have created and funded the AACC student scholarship fund and provide the students at the VADP with positive, successful adult role models and mentors.

The VADP is a school of choice. Students come from the general population of the district. These students have either dropped out of school or are on the verge of dropping out. They are referred to the VADP by their high school counselor. After referral, the students are interviewed by the VADP counselor who determines if placement at VADP is the best direction for the student to pursue. Once a student is accepted into the VADP, he or she starts with a 4-day orientation before starting classes.

Entering and leaving the VADP is a revolving process. Students leave the VADP as soon as they have completed their graduation requirements, and then invited to return for the December or June graduation ceremony. As students graduate and openings occur, additional students are brought in as a cohort. The new groups enter approximately every 30 days. The teachers at the VADP each offer a presentation at the orientation.

Participants

This single instrumental case study included 12 purposefully selected participants. Patton (2002) stated, "Qualitative inquiry typically focuses in-depth on relatively small samples, even single cases, selected purposefully" (p. 230). Therefore, the targeted sample of 10–15 was appropriate. In addition, purposeful sampling is used to select participants who can best inform the case that is being studied (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 1998; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014). Purposeful sampling also provides rich information, deep insights, and in-depth understanding of the case (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). The specific study participants for the current study included the following: the founding director of the program, the district leader who hired the founding director, the district leader who wrote the original grant proposal for the VADP, and eight current VADP teachers and former teachers who worked under the founding director.

The founding director is a female with a PhD in educational leadership who had recently retired. The supervisor who hired the founding director is a male with a PhD in educational leadership and also recently retired. The administrator who wrote the original grant is a female with a PhD in educational administration who has been retired since 2007; she has been continually affiliated with the VADP since its inception.

Procedures

After a successful proposal defense and obtaining approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Liberty University (see Appendix D), I formally contacted all participants identified in this study with a letter explaining the purpose of my research and invited them to participate (see Appendices E and F). I asked the three administrators, mentioned above, to participate in semistructured individual interviews, and I asked three purposely selected teachers, from those who responded affirmatively to my initial participation request, to participate in

semistructured individual interviews. Last, I asked those same three teachers and the remaining teachers to participate in a focus group interview to gather data for the study. One of the three teachers was unable to participate in the focus group.

Interviews were recorded using two different recording devices: one device was a back-up in case of a malfunction with the primary recorder. In addition to the recorders, I took notes during the sessions. The individual interview sessions were scheduled at a time and location convenient for each individual interview participant. I met with the founding director, and the administrator who wrote the original grant in their respective homes, and I met with the supervising administrator at a restaurant. The individual semistructured interviews were scheduled for 30 minutes. In addition, I conducted an individual interview with a teacher, at her request, who had originally agreed to be part of the focus group but had a last-minute conflict and was unable to attend the focus group. The actual interviews lasted from 15 minutes to 67 minutes. In each of the individual interviews, I asked questions that would provide information concerning both the central research question and the research subquestions of this study (see Appendices G, H, and I).

The focus group interview was held in a classroom room at the VADP (see Appendix J for focus group questions). The focus group was made up of seven participants (V. Wilson, 2016). All individual interviews and the focus group interview were digitally recorded using audio-recording devices. Once prospective participants responded positively to an invitation to participate in this study, I emailed consent forms to the participants and had them sign them and then return the forms to me (see Appendix K).

Creswell and Poth (2018) stated that data analysis is a part of a spiral process of data collection, analysis, and reporting: “To analyze qualitative data, the researcher engages in the

process of moving in analytical circles rather than using a fixed linear approach" (p. 185). Therefore, as I moved through this spiral, I used reading and memoing to analyze the data. According to Creswell and Poth, "Memos are short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occur to the reader" (p. 188). The documents I reviewed are available to the public through a request to the VADP or AACC. I requested these documents through the AACC, and the founding director.

Between the individual interviews and the focus group interview, I began with a sample size of 10–15. My actual sample size was 12. I used purposeful sampling and maximum variation sampling. Purposeful sampling can provide unique understanding of the research problem (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002). Maximum variation sampling "consists of determining in advance some criteria that differentiate the sites or participants, and then selecting sites or participants that are quite different on the criteria" (Creswell, 2013, p. 157).

Sample size is an area in qualitative studies that causes some problems (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995). Stake (1995) indicated that the sample size needs to be large enough to maximize what can be learned. When using focus groups to gather data, groups of seven to 10 people should be adequate. However, Patton (2002) said, "What is crucial is that the sampling procedures and decisions be fully described, explained, and justified" (p. 246).

The Researcher's Role

I acknowledge, as Patton (2002) pointed out, "The researcher is the instrument. The credibility of qualitative methods, therefore, hinges to a great extent on the skill, competence, and rigor of the person doing fieldwork" (p. 14). Therefore, I practiced conducting interviews among my family and peers in order to improve my interviewing techniques. I also used

member checking to ensure that I accurately transcribed the individual interviews and focus group so that I will get the proper meaning from the participants and help limit any biases I might have.

I have been involved in education since 1982 and most of the time I have worked in alternative education. My first teaching job after graduating from college was with the Ogdensburg Free Academy, or OFA, in Ogdensburg, NY, where I worked in their dropout program. This program had two students when I started, and by the end of the year it included only five students. While considered by the district as a dropout program, the program I worked in included students who were on the verge of dropping out and students who had been expelled from the traditional secondary school. Since the beginning of my teaching career, the majority of students I have taught have been considered at-risk. I have worked with students in court schools, dropout schools and programs, students repeating 1 or more years of school, low-performing students in traditional schools, and students in drug rehabilitation programs.

I was cautious about researcher bias in this study. I have worked with most of these participants in the past. I was vigilant to avoid interjecting my personal bias into the proceedings. I used strict interview protocol to ensure that I did not unconsciously influence participants' answers and to make sure that I did not steer the discussions, but rather, facilitated them. I was aware that although I know some of the participants, they bring their own points of view and interpretations of the leadership of the VADP. It is essential that I did not allow my bias to affect the memoing and coding as I searched for common themes that were presented in the data. I helped limit the impact of my bias by using a strict interview protocol (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002) and by using reflective journaling (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mehra, 2002; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002).

Although I have anecdotally observed some students in dropout prevention programs be successful; more often, these at-risk students have dropped out of school. When I encountered the VADP, I was impressed with the graduation rate they have maintained for over a decade. I was intrigued and curious to identify how a program with all its students identified as at-risk can have a graduation rate significantly higher than similar programs.

Data Collection

Data were collected through documents, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. In addition, during my research, I encountered a large number of student testimonials written as a requirement for graduation. I felt as though the material presented further insight to the questions guiding this study, so I included them in the document review. I reviewed over 300 student testimonials and selected only those testimonials that could positively be identified as written by students 18 years of age and older. This determination was made by students self-identifying as 18 or older in the text of the testimonial. I conducted a document review at the VADP to better understand the formation of the school, its philosophical tenets, its history, and its goals. In addition, I conducted individual interviews with the founding director of the program, the district leader who hired and supervised the founding director, the district leader who wrote the original grant proposal for the program, and three teachers who served under the founding director of the VADP. One of the former teachers, who served under the founding director, is the current director of the VADP. I interviewed him individually; asking him question about his experiences under the founding director and then asked questions about his role as current director. Finally, I conducted one focus group session with teachers who served under the founding director during her tenure as director of the VADP.

The documents I researched are available to the public upon request from VADP or the AACC. Documents included the original grant request; the *TorchBearer*, an in-house newsletter, student testimonials written as a graduation requirement, and the annual reports issued by the VADP. While I used all of these documents in my research, they could not be cited to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the identity of VADP (see Appendices A, B, and C).

I also conducted an individual interview with the district administrator, who wrote the original grant for the VADP, to gather a comprehensive background of the program and the original intent of the VADP. Then I conducted an individual interview with the district administrator who supervised the founding director regarding his perceptions about her leadership of the VADP. Interviewing these two individuals led to additional questions that I asked the founding director to gain a deeper, richer understanding of her, and the VADP.

Third, I conducted an individual interview with the founding director. Fourth, I conducted individual interviews with three selected teachers. By conducting the individual interviews first, I gained a deeper understanding of the policies and programs of the founding leader of the VADP that helped guide my questions for the focus group. Following these interviews, I conducted the focus group to gain a deeper understanding of the founding director's leadership as viewed by those who served under her. I conducted the focus group interview last, with the intent that the findings might precipitate a need for a second interview with the founding director. However, I found that an additional interview was not necessary.

Documents

A document review helped me understand the background of the VADP and the founding director. The documents I researched are available to the public upon request from the VADP or AACC. Documents included the original grant request, the annual report issued by the VADP,

student testimonials, and the newsletter published by the VADP. I also asked the founding director if she kept a journal during her time as director of the VADP. She did keep a journal but was not willing to share that documentation. However, she did discuss her feelings about and recollections of her time as the founding director. Document reviews can provide a thick, rich background for a study (Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002). Documents can provide background and information that may not be available through interviews and observations (Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002). Except for a journal by the founding director, all documents are available to the public through a request to the VADP or the VADP AACC. As I read the documents, I analyzed them through memoing. Creswell (2013) said memoing consists of "writing short notes or memos in the margins of the . . . database" (p. 183).

Interviews

Interviews can take several forms. They can be structured or unstructured, conducted in person, over the telephone, over the Internet, or other electronic methods (Creswell, 2013; Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002). According to Patton (2002), "The purpose of interviewing, then, is to allow us to enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 341). Individual interviews for the study were conducted with the founding director of the VADP, the district leader who hired and supervised the founding director, the district leader who wrote the original grant proposal for the program, a teacher who had agreed to participate in the focus group and then had a conflict, a teacher who served under the founding director and who is currently the director of the VADP, and three teachers who served under the founding director. Individual interviews were conducted at a location of their choice. All individual interviews were conducted face-to-face. I used an interview protocol to help guide the individual interviews (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2014).

Administrator interview questions. The standardized open-ended administrative interview questions (Appendix G) were as follows:

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. How long were you a supervisor?
3. Why did you select the founding director to lead Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
4. How would you describe the founding director's leadership style?
5. How do you think her leadership impacted the success of Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
6. In what ways did the founding director enable teacher leadership?
7. You were part of the team that wrote the original grant for Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention. Do you think the founding director's leadership impacted the shaping of the culture and direction of Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. Was there anything at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention that you now, looking back, think could be changed to make the school an even better experience?
9. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

The purpose of the administrative questions was to understand how a leader's policies and programs impacted the success of the VADP during their tenure. The first question was intended simply as an icebreaker (Leedy & Ormrod, 2002). Leedy and Ormrod (2002) suggested to start "the conversation with small talk that can break the ice" (p. 147). Administrator Questions 2 through 4 were designed to gather knowledge (Patton, 2002).

The literature indicates there are three main factors in highly successful alternative schools (Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al.,1989). Those factors are schools that generate and

sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989); engaging, innovative, and compelling curriculum (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis, 2012; Raywid, 1994b; Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989); and broadening staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Administrator Questions 5 through 8 were designed to gather information regarding the administrators' views on how a leader impacts the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Administrator Question 5 and 6 addressed the first factor, which is to create and sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Creating and sustaining community is a way to get both the internal community (students and staff) and the external community to buy into and support the program.

Administrator Question 7 addressed the second factor of successful alternative programs (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis, 2012; Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989). That factor is to have and create innovative and engaging curriculum. Administrator Question 7 also addresses third factor, which is to broaden staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Administrator Question 8 was a one-shot question (Patton, 2002) intended to gather any additional knowledge learned through the experience of the administrators who created the VADP. Administrator Question 9 was another one-shot closing question (Patton, 2002) to provide the participants a chance to add any information they believed was important to know about the success of the VADP.

Founding director questions. The purpose of the founding director questions (Appendix H) was to understand how the founding director's policies and programs impacted the success of the VADP during her tenure.

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.

2. How long were you an administrator?
3. How would you describe your leadership style?
4. How did being an administrator at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other leadership experiences?
5. Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?
6. How would you describe the culture at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
7. What did you do to encourage teacher leadership at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. What did you do to encourage engaging and innovative learning at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
9. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

The first question was intended simply as an icebreaker (Leedy & Ormrod, 2002). Founding Director Questions 2 through 4 were questions meant to gather knowledge (Patton, 2002). Founding Director Questions 5 through 8 were designed to gather information regarding the founding director's views on how a leader impacts the development of policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program.

Founding Director Questions 5 and 6 addressed the first factor, which is to create and sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Creating and sustaining community is a way to get both the internal community (students and staff) and the external community to buy into and support the program.

Founding Director Question 7 addressed the second factor of successful alternative programs: to have and create innovative and engaging curriculum (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis,

2012; Raywid, 1994b; Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989). Founding Director Questions 7 and 8 address the third factor, which is to broaden staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Founding Director Question 9 was a one-shot question (Patton, 2002). It was also the closing question to provide the participant a chance to add any information she felt was important to know about the success of the VADP.

Teacher interview questions. The purpose of the individual teacher interview questions was to understand how a school leader can develop policies and procedures to develop a successful dropout prevention program. Following are the standardized open-ended teacher interview questions (Appendix I):

1. How long were you a teacher at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
2. How did teaching at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other teaching experiences?
3. Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?
4. Will you describe any innovative, engaging curriculum used at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
5. In what ways did the founding director enable teacher leadership?
6. How would you describe the culture at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
7. Could you describe the feeling of community established at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

The first and second questions were intended simply as icebreakers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2002).

Teacher Questions 3 through 7 were questions meant to gather knowledge (Patton, 2002). The literature indicates there are three main factors in highly successful alternative schools (Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Those factors are schools that generate and sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989); engaging, innovative, and compelling curriculum (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis, 2012; Raywid, 1994b; Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989); and broadening staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Teacher Questions 3 through 7 were designed to gather information regarding the teachers' views on whether or not a school leader developed policies and programs that helped develop a successful dropout prevention program.

Teacher Questions 5 and 6 addressed the first factor, which is to create and sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Creating and sustaining community is a way to get both the internal community (students and staff) and the external community to buy into and support the program.

Teacher Question 7 addressed the second factor of successful alternative programs: to have and create innovative and engaging curriculum (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis, 2012; Raywid, 1994b; Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989). Teacher Question 7 also addressed the third factor, which is to broaden staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Teacher Question 8 was a one-shot question (Patton, 2002) meant to open the discussion to further possible factors that the teachers intimately involved with the VADP felt enabled VADP to be successful.

Focus Group Interview

According to Patton (2002), "Focus groups involve open-ended interviews with groups of five to eight people on specially targeted or focused issues" (p. 236). V. Wilson (2016) stated

that one benefit of focus groups is that the researcher can gather considerable data in a small amount of time. If the researcher gets a group of people talking, "the insights will often go further because of the group dynamics" (V. Wilson, 2016, p. 129). For the current study, I developed initial questions for the focus group interview based on responses from the individual teacher interviews (see Appendix J). In addition, during the focus group interview, I asked questions that provided information related to the central research question and the research subquestions.

The focus group interview was conducted with seven teachers, including the three teachers individually interviewed, who served under the founding director at the VADP and who responded to the letter requesting their participation in the focus group. The focus group interview was held in a classroom at the VADP. The focus group interview was recorded using two different audio-recording devices, with one used as a back-up in case of a malfunction with the primary recording device. In addition to the recorders, I took notes during the sessions. The focus group session was scheduled for 60 minutes, but actually lasted 90 minutes, and was semistructured to include questions and possible prompts.

Prior to facilitating the focus group interview, I prompted the participants by assuring them that no right or wrong answers to the questions existed, multiple perspectives were encouraged, all views were important, and consensus was not required (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). In addition, even though the same questions used during the individual interviews were used as guiding questions for the focus group interview, as the facilitator, I prompted the interview by underscoring the need for the participants to listen and respond to all the participants' responses and then add comments "beyond their original responses as they hear what others have to say" (Patton, 2015, p. 275). Following are the standardized open-ended focus group questions:

1. How long were you a teacher at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
2. How did teaching at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other teaching experiences?
3. Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?
4. Will you describe any innovative, engaging curriculum used at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
5. In what ways did the founding director enable teacher leadership?
6. How would you describe the culture at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
7. Could you describe the feeling of community established at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

The purpose of the focus group questions was to understand how a school leader can develop policies and procedures to develop a successful dropout prevention program. The first and second questions were intended simply as icebreakers (Leedy & Ormrod, 2002). Leedy and Ormrod (2002) suggested that one should start "the conversation with small talk that can break the ice" (p. 147).

Focus Group Questions 3 through 7 were questions meant to gather knowledge (Patton, 2002). The literature indicates there are three main factors in highly successful alternative schools (Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Those factors are schools that generate and sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989); engaging, innovative, and compelling curriculum (DeAlgelis, 2012; Cook, 2013; Raywid, 1994b; Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989); and broadening staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b;

Wehlage et al.; 1989). Focus Group Questions 3 through 7 are designed to gather information regarding the teachers' views on whether or not a school leader developed policies and programs that helped develop a successful dropout prevention program.

Focus Group Questions 5 and 6 addressed the first factor, which is to create and sustain community (Daggett, 2015; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Creating and sustaining community is a way to get both the internal community (students and staff) and the external community to buy into and support the program.

Focus Group Question 7 addressed the second factor of successful alternative programs: to have and create innovative and engaging curriculum (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis, 2012, Sliwka, 2008; Wehlage et al., 1989). Focus Group Question 7 also addressed the third factor, which is to broaden staff roles (Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Raywid, 1994b; Wehlage et al., 1989). Focus Group Question 8 was a one-shot question (Patton, 2002) meant to open the discussion to further possible factors that the people intimately involved with the VADP felt enabled VADP to be successful.

Data Analysis

I used pattern, theme, and content analysis methodology to understand the data, as suggested by Patton (2002). According to Creswell (2013), "Data collection, data analysis, and report writing are not distinct steps in the process- they are interrelated and often go on simultaneously in a research project" (p. 182). Additionally, data analysis in qualitative research is continuous and repetitive (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). Furthermore, Patton (2002) stated that "developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis" (p. 463).

I listened to the recorded interviews numerous times to ensure accurate data transcription. Once satisfied that the transcripts were accurate, I used memoing to begin analysis. Memoing requires the researcher to make notes and comments in the margins of the data to seek out patterns (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2002). I also used memoing on the transcripts of the individual interviews as well as the focus group interview. Finally, I used memoing as I reviewed the documents obtained from the VADP.

Following the memoing, I formed codes and categories of ideas and information as described by the participants. Creswell (2013) believed that codes and categories are the "heart of qualitative data analysis" (p.184). In addition, Patton (2002) explained, "Content analysis is used to refer to any qualitative data reduction and sense-making effort that takes a volume of qualitative material and attempts to identify core consistencies and meanings. Case studies, for example, can be content analyzed" (p. 453). This requires the systematic analysis of each section of the transcripts and noting the topics, similarities, and differences with other sections of the transcripts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012; Creswell, 2009, 2013; Yin, 2009).

After I finished transcribing the individual interviews and the focus group interview recordings, I sent copies of the transcripts to the participants for member checking. Once the transcripts were member checked and returned to me, I memoed the transcripts. Memoing is the process of making notes in the margins of the transcript to develop patterns. After memoing, I reviewed the memos and grouped the information in themes and categories.

According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2012), "The most fundamental underlying operation in the analysis of qualitative data is that of discovering significant classes or sets of things, person, and events and the properties that characterize them" (p. 137). As I categorized the information obtained from data analysis, I searched for those properties that are present. Finally,

the patterns and properties that evolved and developed, provided answers to the research questions of the study. With these patterns, I developed naturalistic generalizations, which Creswell and Poth (2018) defined as "generalizations that people can learn from the case for themselves, apply learnings to a population of cases, or transfer them to another similar context" (p. 206).

By analyzing the data from the individual interviews, the focus group interview, and the documents obtained from the archives of the VADP, I was able to find the answers to the research questions guiding this study.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study can be achieved through data triangulation which is a method of collecting multiple forms of data to enhance the reliability (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 1998; Patton, 2002). Therefore, I used document reviews, individual interviews, and focus group interviews to provide data triangulation. According to Mertens (1998), "Typically, qualitative researchers use three review main methods for collecting data; participant observation, interviews, and document and record review" (p. 175).

Credibility

Credibility was established through member checking, during which the participants reviewed the transcript of the interviews to ensure that I captured the data correctly and the intent of the data was correct. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). To establish member checking, I had the participants review the completed written transcripts of the interview or focus group they were a part of to ensure that I correctly recorded their comments. Further, I asked the participants to make sure that what they said during the interview was the message they intended to convey.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability was addressed through an audit trail, which is defined by Creswell and Poth (2018) as a "document that allows a researcher to retrace the process by which the researcher arrived at their final findings" (p. 323). I used an audit trail to record my thoughts and actions while collecting data to help me check any biases I may have. Patton (2002) said that an audit trail can be used to "verify the rigor of your fieldwork and confirmability of the data collected" (p. 93). An audit trail can also help others to follow the path I took to make the decisions I made. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that using an audit trail has "innumerable payoffs in helping to systematize, relate, cross-reference, and attach priorities to data" (p. 319).

Member checking can also be used to increase dependability in a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checking for this study allowed the participants who were either individually interviewed or included in the focus group interview to read the transcript of the interview in which they participated to verify the contents of the transcription (Mertens, 1998). After I conducted the individual interviews and focus group interview, I submitted a copy of the transcript to each participant, so they could check for accuracy and intent.

According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), confirmability is simply an assurance that the results of the study reflect information and data gathered from the participants and not the biases of the researcher. I guarded against using my personal motivations or perspectives regarding the research to ensure confirmability. In addition, I used an audit trail to ensure confirmability of the findings.

Transferability

Creswell (2009) noted a rich, thick description may "transport the readers to the setting and give the discussion an element of shared experiences" (p. 191). Therefore, I provided a rich,

thick description of the VADP and did a thorough document review of historical and current documents of the VADP to provide an understanding of the founding philosophies of the Academy. By including information about the setting, the interview questions, and participants, while still protecting the confidentiality of the participants, I was able produce a study that can be transferable to other schools to develop successful dropout prevention programs.

Ethical Considerations

All data collected are stored on my laptop, which is password-protected and 3 years after the conclusion of the study, all identifying data were destroyed. All printed data are stored in a locked cabinet. Any other data that could not be stored on my laptop has been stored in a locked cabinet. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of all participants interviewed and all participants in the focus groups. All participants in this study were over the age of 18.

Prior to the start of this research, I gained approval from the Liberty University IRB (Appendix D). In the letters I sent out to possible participants, I informed them of the nature of the study (Appendices E and F). I made sure they understood the voluntary nature of their participation and the ability to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. At the time of the interviews, I again provided the participants with an informed consent form (Appendix H). I also reiterated the voluntary nature of their participation.

Summary

This study utilized a qualitative single instrumental case study design to investigate how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. The setting for the study was the VADP and the participants were the founding director of the program, the district leader who hired the founding director, the district leader who wrote the original grant proposal for the VADP, one teacher who served under the founding

director and is now the director of the VADP and seven VADP teachers who worked under the founding director.

Data collection included documents, individual interviews, and a focus group interview. I conducted the individual interviews and the focus group interview using a semistructured interview protocol (Appendices G, H, I, and J). The interview questions elicited data that helped answer the research questions of the study regarding how administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create successful dropout prevention programs. Data analysis included pattern, theme, and content analysis methodology.

The trustworthiness of the study has been ensured through measures to address credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. In addition, data triangulation in the study was achieved through multiple data sources, including document reviews, individual interviews, and a focus group interview.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. This chapter begins with a review of the central research question and research subquestions of the study, followed by a description of the participants. All of the participants are familiar with the VADP and its founding director. The results section includes discussion of both theme development and responses to research questions. Theme development encompassed the research data and the themes and codes that developed as the data were analyzed. The data are presented in narrative form, as are the responses to the research questions. Responses are supported by quotes from the participants. The documents used in this study, including the year-end reports, the *TorchBearer* newsletter, and the student testimonials could not be cited to protect the confidentiality of the participants. Appendices A, B, and C are samples of each document, respectively.

Participants

The participants for this single instrumental case study included eight teachers, two district administrators, the current director of the VADP (who was also a teacher at the Academy), and the founding director of the VADP. All participants have specific knowledge of the VADP and the founding director of the academy. All names are pseudonyms to protect the anonymity of the participants. All mentioned awards do not have dates attached to help protect the anonymity of the participants. Table 1 includes the participant demographics.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Gender	Years of experience	Position
Ava	Female	32	Administrator (retired)
Debbie	Female	36	Founding director (retired)
Elsa	Female	12	Teacher
Evie	Female	45	Teacher (retired)
Isaac	Male	14	Teacher
Jacob	Male	38	Administrator (retired)
Leo	Male	25	Current director
Max	Male	32	Teacher (retired)
Nicolas	Male	13	Teacher
Poppy	Female	22	Teacher (retired)
Siena	Female	17	Teacher
Sophia	Female	27	Teacher (retired)

Ava

Ava is a native Texan. She earned her Bachelor of Science degree from Texas A & I in Kingsville, Texas, her Master of Education degree from Southern University in Statesboro, Georgia and her Doctor of Education degree from Texas A&M. Ava, along with Jacob, wrote the original grant that established the VADP. At the time she cowrote the grant application, she was a district administrator in charge of community education. Ava travelled the world as the spouse of a U.S. Air Force officer. All during this time, she was involved in education. Ava has been recognized by the Texas State Board of Education with the Heros for Children Award. She has been inducted into the San Antonio Women's Hall of Fame. The VADP named a room after Ava and established a community service award in her name as well. She retired from public

education but continues to be affiliated with students and education through memberships in various boards and organizations.

Debbie

Debbie is the founding director of the VADP. She was born in the Midwest and began her teaching career at Father Flanagan's Boys' Home. At the time she was hired as the director of the VADP, she was an English department chair at a high school in the district. The design team for the Academy specifically wanted a leader who was not already a principal or an assistant principal. Debbie earned her bachelor of arts degree in English in 1968. Later, she earned her master of arts in curriculum and design. In 1996, she earned her PhD from Texas A&M. As director of the VADP, she won many local and national awards and recognitions. She was an Executive Board Member of the National Dropout Prevention Center–Network; National Finalist of the Time Warner Cable's Champion Principal Award, Beta Tau's Delta Kappa Gamma Key Women in Education Award; Regional Finalist of HEB's Excellence in Education Award, and the Crystal Star Individual Award for Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention. She is also an inductee in the San Antonio Women's Hall of Fame. Before Debbie retired, the VADP was renamed the Debbie Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention. She retired from public education in 2011. Dr. Johnson addressed the issue of reaching students on an individual basis, stating that the Academy not only learned about the learning and teaching styles of the instructional staff, but "then we took it further, and also taught the students" about their learning styles.

Elsa

Elsa grew up in San Antonio, Texas, but originally followed a career in business. Elsa graduated from Trinity University and went to work in the advertising industry. She worked as a

senior account executive for McDonald's restaurants in San Antonio, Victoria, and Corpus Christi, Texas. Later, she decided to return to college and pursued a master of education in office education and marketing education. At the time of the study, she taught marketing, health, and physical education, and sponsored the Distributive Education Clubs of America (now known as DECA, Inc.) students. When talking about what was important at the VADP Elsa stated, "The students have to come first, student success comes first, and you have to creatively figure out how to teach these students hadn't been successful." She has won several teaching awards, including Texas Exes Rising Stars of Texas in Education, the San Antonio Credit Union Teaching Award, KENS 5 TV station ExCEL award, and the District High School Teacher of the Year. She has also been trained in the 4MAT system of curriculum and instruction, and the Covey 7 Habits of Highly Effective People. She has also presented at national conferences. She is very involved in volunteer work in particularly the Ronald McDonald Houses of San Antonio. Elsa continued her education, earning her masters in educational leadership and has obtained her administrative license. She continues to work at the Academy as the marketing and physical education teacher.

Evie

Evie taught for over 45 years. She has taught every grade in K–12, and at the VADP, she taught all math subjects. Evie has presented multiple times at national conferences. Evie is a tireless promoter of the VADP: "When I was selected to teach at VADP I felt like I had died and gone to teacher heaven." She was named the District Teacher of the Year and also received the ExCEL award for excellence in teaching. She won the Texas Exes Award for Outstanding Teachers and the Trinity Prize for Excellence in Teaching, beating out teachers from 20 other districts.

Isaac

Isaac grew up in the Midwest. He went to high school and college in Indiana. After graduation, he taught computer programming and web design, and coached at an Indiana high school. In addition to teaching he was the computer technology trainer for many different organizations. He began teaching at the VADP in 2006. Discussing the founding director of VADP, Isaac said, "She empowered us." While teaching at the Academy, he added English to his certification. The local Rotary Club recognizes one educator each quarter from two different school districts as an outstanding educator and in 2007, Isaac was so recognized. He was named VADP Teacher of the Year. He was also nominated for the Trinity University Prize for Excellence in Teaching. He now works as a district-wide IT consultant.

Jacob

Jacob grew up in Brenham, Texas. He attended Texas A&M out of high school, but due to an accident his father had, Jacob had to leave Texas A&M and return to run his father's business. He enrolled in Blinn Junior College and then later transferred to Southwest Texas University graduating with a degree in speech education. He earned his Master's degree in Guidance and Counseling at the University of Texas in San Antonio. Jacob earned his PhD in 2007. He started his educational career in Abilene, Texas and in 1972, he moved to San Antonio, Texas and started working in the district. Jacob, along with Ava, wrote the original grant for the VADP. At the time, he was the Director of Special Projects in the district. He said that when looking for a director for the VADP, "We wanted someone who was passionate, who was innovative, who was competent, and who was experienced." During his distinguished career, he was recognized for his many achievements. In 1991 he became a Lifetime Member of the National Eagle Scout Association, and also a Vigil member of the Order of the Arrow. That

year he was also the President of Large Urban Associations–National Education Association. He was awarded the Educator of the Year Award from Texas A&M University. He won the Executive Director of the Year Award from the Homeless Network of Texas. The VADP honored Jacob by naming a room in the school after him, The Jacob Professional Center. He received the PTA–Lifetime Achievement Award. He retired from public education in 2010.

Leo

Leo was born and raised in Texas. After graduating from high school, he attended Texas A & M where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology. He comes from an education background: his grandfather, father, and mother were all educators. Leo joined the staff at the VADP in 1999. Leo created several classes at the Academy incorporating technology and hands on experience. He developed a relationship with Sea World of San Antonio which allowed students to spend 5 days at Sea World, completing sections of their Aquatic Science curriculum. Leo presented at America's At-Risk Youth National Forum in February of 2003. He earned a master's degree in counseling and left the VADP in 2008, to take a counseling position in the district. While at his new school, he developed a program for ninth graders, modeled on the VADP to help them recover credit and get back on track for graduation. The program he developed was recognized as a model program in a proclamation by the Texas House of Representatives. Later Leo became an assistant principal. He recently returned to the VADP as its third director. When asked about how the founding director enabled teacher leadership, Leo said,

> She was really good at giving those trust pieces and then kind of taking a step back and helping you evaluate the things that were effective and the things that were not so effective. So it kind of fostered the leadership in that way.

Max

Max was born and grew up in San Antonio, Texas. He graduated college with a bachelor of arts degree in elementary and bilingual education, art, and art education. He taught in four different districts in Texas before moving back to San Antonio. While teaching in one of the districts, he helped pilot their bilingual program. When he joined the Academy in 2003, he taught all levels of Spanish. Later he also became the academy art teacher. Max has presented in educational programs, including the 2003 America's At-Risk Youth National Forum in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. He has participated in several conferences dealing with at-risk students. In 2004, he attended the Reclaiming Youth International Conference in Rapid City, South Dakota. In March 2004, Max was invited by the International Schools of the Americas to accompany its sophomore class to Zacatecas, Mexico. While working for the district, Max also painted murals in several of the schools. Max mentioned that the VADP required community service for graduation long before it became the norm at high schools. "That was satisfying for me, but just to see the kids' reaction, the students' reaction, to see how a family appreciated what they were doing. It still stands out as one of the highlights of my 4 years here." Max retired from public school teaching in 2006 after 32 years of teaching. He continues to teach private art lessons to students of all ages. He particularly enjoys working with special needs students. In his personal life, he is a big sports fan and his favorite teams are the San Antonio Spurs and the Dallas Cowboys.

Nicolas

Nicolas was born in a small village in Mexico. When he was 9 years old his family moved to the southwest United States. There he attended high school and the earned his Bachelor's degree from the University of Texas Pan American. While in college, studying art,

he assisted his mentor in the sculpting of a 50-foot statue of the Virgin de Guadalupe. He has taught bilingual education, art, and Spanish in several high schools in Texas. He joined the VADP in 2006. When asked about who the founding director helped empower teachers he said, "She trusted us completely with the curriculum, with the students, with everything." He has participated in the Franklin-Covey Workshop on *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. He was teaching at the Academy at the time of this study.

Poppy

Poppy grew up in San Antonio, Texas and graduated from a local high school. After high school, she attended the University of Texas in San Antonio, where she majored in business administration and received her degree in 1981. After graduation, she spent 10 years in banking. She realized that she really enjoyed working with young people and math so she returned to school and earned a teaching certificate in math. She taught for 16 years before she joined the staff at the VADP. Poppy was proud of the fact that students from the VADP were part of the academy for life. "Once a VADPer always a VADPer. Come back. Call us if you need anything. Life advice, what to do next, if you need contacts." Poppy was named the Academy Teacher of the Year. She also attended numerous conferences and training events. Poppy retired from teaching in 2014.

Siena

Siena grew up in Texas and graduated from the University of Texas at Austin. Later, she obtained her masters from University of Texas at San Antonio. At the time of the study, Siena taught social studies at the Academy. She was a presenter at the National Dropout Prevention Network Conference held in November 2010 at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Her presentation was "Empowering the At-Risk Learner." When asked about how the founding director

empowered teachers, Siena stated, "She really felt that she would shine if the teachers shined, and if the teachers shined, the kids would outshine us all." Siena has also been trained in the 4-MAT system of curriculum and instruction. In her spare time, she sings at many local venues. Siena continues to teach at the VADP.

Sophia

Sophia was born and grew up in rural Texas, attended the University of Texas in Austin, and received a bachelor of science degree in education. She then earned teaching certification in English and drama. Sophia first job was teaching English and theater arts. When she had her first child, she left teaching for several years. During that time she worked doing interior design. She did the interior design and furnishing of several Padre Island condominiums. When she returned to teaching, she taught middle school theater arts. In 1991, she and her family moved to San Antonio, Texas where Sophia started teaching English again; 13 years later she began teaching English at the VADP. Sophia was touched by both the collaborative work environment at the academy and the caring attitude toward students: "I really value the collaborative nature of it, but one of the things that to me personally was the caring aspect towards the students." Sophia presented at two National Dropout Prevention Conferences, in 2005 and 2006. She was named the VADP Teacher of the Year. She retired from teaching in 2014.

Results

The following are the results of this single instrumental case study. Data were collected from individual interviews, focus group interview, student testimonials; the *TorchBearer*, an in-house newsletter published periodically by the VADP; an annual report prepared by the VADP, and the original grant proposal for establishing the VADP. The results from these sources are described in more detail under each of the thematic headings. A systematic analysis technique

analyzed each of these sources. The following sections describe the themes developed during the analysis of the data.

Through data analysis, six major themes emerged from 17 subthemes. These subthemes emerged from 119 codes. These themes, subthemes and codes are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Themes

Themes	Subthemes	Codes
High-quality teachers	Award-winning teachers	Celebrations, climate, communications, creative, innovative, master teachers, risk-takers, multicertified, sustained teaching excellence
	Student-oriented	Climate, communication, excellent teaching strategies, small classes
	Teacher leadership	Climate, communication, empowered, servant leadership
Teacher–student relationships	Teacher as mentor	Communication, modeling, frequent student–teacher conferences
	Student value	Believing in students, connect with teachers, mutual trust, treated like an individual
	Positive, encouraging	Climate, communication, positive thinking, work to find solutions
	Teachers care	Bond between friends, calls to students, compassionate, culture of respect, nice, faith, felt at home, hospitable, know students personally, nurture, passionate, second chances, touched lives, welcoming
Innovative curriculum	Teacher-designed	Original curriculum, creative, redesigning education, unique
	Student-oriented	Student-centered, individualized, unique

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)

Theme	Subtheme	Code
Innovative curriculum, cont.	Flexible	Climate, student-centered, alternative means of meeting student needs, out of cycle graduation
Empowered and engaged students	School of choice	Choose to be here, flexible hours, nontraditional student, personalized graduation plan
	Select curriculum	Climate, take class in order I choose, ownership of work, flexibility, ownership of graduation
	Celebrate success	Announcing graduates, students as winners, student success, college acceptance, students as presenters, confidence, courage, learners as teachers, persistence, winners
Community involvement	Partnerships	Assisting graduates, climate, college acceptance, student presenters, community service, innovative business partnerships, visitors
	Family	Climate, children, grandma, family involvement, students as parents
Public relations	Toot your own horn	100% pass on TAAS (6 years straight, years), celebrations
	Award winning	Crystal Award, HEB Leadership Award, Trinity Award

Theme 1: High Quality Teachers

The first theme that emerged from the data was that of high-quality teachers. According to Raywid (1994b) successful alternative schools develop a climate for engaging learning. Part of that climate is hiring high-quality teachers. According to the VADP 16th Annual Year End Report, 2006-2007, "The single most important factor to consider when staffing a non-traditional school is the selection of personnel. The Academy staff is a multi-certified instructional team with diverse learning styles." In addition to being highly qualified, according to Foran (2015),

teachers in successful programs were never just assigned to the school, they applied and were selected to work in the program. Foran (2015) stated, "Like the students, all teachers and support staff chose to be a part of it" (p. 6). The three subthemes that fell under the theme of high-quality teachers are award winning teachers, teachers who are student-oriented, and teacher leadership.

Award-winning teachers. The first subtheme revealed within the major theme of high-quality teachers was award-winning teachers. The VADP is a very small school that started with four teachers and one director. Over the years that the founding director was in charge of the school it grew to include an assistant director and 10 teachers. VADP is one of two nontraditional high schools, 10 high school magnet programs, and eight traditional high schools within the district. The district has over 64,000 students and over 4,000 teachers. Yet VADP has had seven district high school teacher of the year and three district overall teacher of the year. In addition, two teachers have been named regional teacher of the year and finalist for Texas Teacher of the Year. In fact, "For three of the past four years, the district High School Teacher of the Year has been an Academy educator." Only 3 short years later, VADP boasted, "A teacher from the Academy has been named as the district's High School Teacher of the Year five times out of the past seven years." Teachers at VADP have also been recognized as the district representative for the Trinity University Excellence in Teaching award 11 times and have won the award three times. Teachers at VADP have won many other local and state-wide awards such as district Teacher of the Month, Wal-Mart Community Service Award, KENS-5 TV ExCEL award, the area Rotary Club's Outstanding High School Teacher of the Year, the Texas Exes Award for Outstanding Teacher, and MAGIC 105.3 radio Teacher of the Month. In addition to the teaching awards, the founding director was recognized with the Crystal Star

Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention Individual Award by the National Dropout Prevention Center at Clemson University. VADP was also awarded the Crystal Star Award of Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention, and Prevention Institutional Award.

During the focus group interview, the participants mentioned several different awards that VADP teachers had won. They also voiced their opinions on why they won so many awards. Elsa stated,

> I think percentage-wise, we probably have more award winners than a tradition school, and one of the reasons is because we have a mission. When people read our stories, and they read the wonderful examples of what we have done, a lot of the staff here are just amazing people. People that I've worked with, they stand out. They were the best of the best.

Evie, one of the award-winning teachers, said one of the things that helped VADP win awards was that they were committed to getting the recognition for the school. One of the ways that happened was by making sure every teacher had a chance to be recognized. Evie explained, "The award thing, that was also a taking turns thing. The director would say, I am going to put you for this because it's your turn. Yeah. We were all in it. All for one, one for all." Furthermore, Evie thought that another reason VADP teachers won so many awards was because of the teachers that were hired: "I think it was the people she hired. She was really, really careful to hire people who were outstanding in their subject matter. But also, equally important was to hire people with the personality to fit in this school."

All VADP teachers have two or more certifications. One VADP year-end report stated that between the administrators and teachers (a total of nine at the time), they held a total of 36

teaching certifications. It went on to state that VADP offers 68 different subjects for students to take. One teacher has four different teaching certifications and an administrative certification.

Student-oriented. The second subtheme within the major theme of high-quality teachers was that they are student-oriented. One of the goals of the founding director of VADP was to create an environment for students and staff to reach their maximum potential in their respective roles. Isla, the only teacher interviewed who has taught exclusively at VADP, said, "It is all about the students. The 360 degree student." Current director and former teacher at VADP, Leo, explained, "The curriculum development was also more rewarding because you were given the freedom to try new things and innovative things." Leo continued to explain that as long as the state standards were taught, teachers were "encouraged to do whatever was right by the students." In the original grant request to establish the VADP, it is stated that the teaching strategies will be directed at the specific problems of students who are not successful in traditional school settings.

Jacob, one of the district team that conceived and helped bring about the creation of the VADP, stated, "Some kids don't like to focus on six periods a day at one time. They may want to take two classes or two classes at a time and it goes until they're finished and we allow that at the Academy." Evie stated, "I finally I was able to do what I wanted to do and that was to help individuals with their individual needs."

In one student testimonial, 19-year-old Ryan mentioned that the independent study aspect of the curriculum inspired him to complete his school work and graduate. In another student testimonial, 18-year-old Jason indicated that the teachers did everything they could to help the student learn the curriculum. Siena, a 17-year teacher, said in the focus group interview, "We

have a lot more flexibility with how we can allow a student to show what they know and so that opens up some avenues for us."

One of the means the VADP used to individualize the curriculum was to look at learning styles, not just of the teachers, but also of the students. According to Jacob, "We focus first on students, but you have to focus on your staff. You have to empower them to feel like they're in charge of creating individual kid's needs. There are different styles." Debbie, the founding director, added that both teachers and students completed a learning styles inventory. It was helpful for the students. Debbie explained that after having completed the learning style inventory, they

> taught the students that it wasn't their fault they weren't successful at the previous school [they attended]. It wasn't because they were stupid or they couldn't do it. It was because the style, they learn differently. Not everybody learns at the same time, at the same pace.

While using the learning styles information, teachers would focus on ways to make the student successful. According to Elsa,

> The students have to come first, student success comes first, and you have to creatively figure out how to teach these students hadn't been successful. You creatively were to help that student succeed and be comfortable that they have mastered what they needed to master the curriculum.

An additional way the VADP staff stayed focused on students was a weekly meeting held by the teachers during which they discussed every student in the school. Debbie explained,

> Weekly, the teachers would get together as a team and review students, so we knew who needed more attention, then we could make a plan, and work with the students on a

personal basis individually, and then get to see what it is they needed to get back on track.

Teacher leadership. The third and final subtheme under the theme of high-quality teachers was that of teacher leadership. An empowered staff encourages staff members to take chances and improve the overall program. Empowerment creates many positive outcomes. For example, empowerment improves teacher quality and increases the desire to innovate as well as the staff's job satisfaction and commitment to the program (A. N. Lee & Nie, 2014). Teacher empowerment, in turn, can improve student performance and overall effectiveness (Garza et al., 2013; Hulpia et al., 2009; A. N. Lee & Nie, 2014; J. C. Lee et al., 2013; Sagnak, 2012; Tannehill & MacPhail, 2016; Vecchio et al., 2010). From the very beginning of the VADP, teacher leadership has been emphasized. Written in the annual year-end report just 3 years after the VADP opened, the staff and leadership of the VADP indicated that they learned teacher empowerment is crucial in making site-based decisions understandable and attainable. Just 2 years later, the year-end report restated that the VADP exemplifies a true site-based decision-making environment and that the staff and administration truly work together to meet the needs of the students.

Teachers at the VADP are expected to take leadership roles. Since it is a small school with a limited staff, everyone participates in leadership opportunities. Siena stated, "Here, I was given really more responsibility in terms of teacher leadership than I think I've ever had. We're a small campus, so everyone has the expectation that everyone is going to have to lead."

Teachers not only participated in staff meetings, they were expected to help in the planning and direction of staff meetings. Isaac explained, "Each teacher would take a turn planning and running the twice-monthly staff meetings." Talking about the monthly staff

meetings and the importance of the leadership role, Nicolas said, "Those meetings were really important to me in leadership, fostering leadership in everybody. I think that was very important and I have changed my life as well, that it has served me well up to this point." In addition to running the staff meetings, the entire staff was expected to be involved in the decision-making process. Sophia said that with every major decision the entire staff would vote thumbs up or thumbs down. If there was no consensus, they would discuss the differing viewpoints until they reached a consensus. According to Sophia,

> We all had to buy in and there was no way that you could be really mad at her or the leader of the meeting or whoever, for making a decision because we all had a part of it and had to take ownership of it, like it or not. I thought those things were really cool.

One of the original members of the group that conceived the idea of the VADP, Ava, talked about the empowerment of the staff by the founding director: "She empowered them to make the decisions that went on in a school with a very open door policy on everything."

Teachers at the VADP were not only active in leadership within the school, but also outside the school. They were active in the leadership of the Texas Association of Alternative Education, and teachers from the VADP served on the board over several years. One of the original teachers when the VADP started, later served as the president of the Association. Another original teacher served as DuPont Leadership Process, State Trainer.

Teachers also took an active role in making presentations to a variety of organizations and dropout prevention groups. The founding director, Debbie, stated,

> Every teacher . . . any teacher could take over at any time, go to any national conference and event. We were all in this together. I think that's what good leaders do. They prepare their successor. The program goes on; it continues when you leave.

In addition, Isaac said,

> One thing I admired a lot about her [the founding director] was that . . . she was humble enough to know when she wasn't strong in a particular area, so she would kind of lean on us, and lean on her counselor or her other administrative team to help out.

Theme 2: Teacher–Student Relationships

The second theme the data revealed was that of positive teacher–student relationships. Bandura (1993) said that efficacy will "influence how people feel, think, motivate themselves and behave" (p. 118). In alternative education, the positive teacher–student relationship can help students begin to develop a more positive outlook on their capabilities (Sulkowski et al., 2012; Wilkins, 2014). Several studies have shown that students who have a quality teacher–student relationship are more successful and more likely to stay in school (Brentro et al., 1990; Daggett, 2015; DeAngelis, 2012; Duhon, 1997; Fay & Funk, 1995; Hall, 1829; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). "Not surprisingly, students at greatest risk of dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teacher" (Bentro et al., 1990, p. 13).

Teacher as mentor. The first subtheme under teacher–student relationships was that of teachers as mentors. Students at the VADP are assigned to an advisory meeting with a faculty member. They are required to meet with the teacher at least once a week for a one-on-one meeting. During that meeting, the teacher reviews the student's academic progress, discusses what the student plans for the coming week, and what obstacles the student may encounter. During these meetings, teachers model problem-solving and planning techniques to help the student build his or her own talents. Every teacher . . . any teacher could take over at any time, go to any national conference and event. We were all in this together. I think that's what good leaders do. Advisors also improved student attendance through personal contact at school and

through daily phone calls. Debbie, the founding director, said of the purpose of those once-a-week meetings:

> The students were tracked in behavior, course progress, and attendance on a card kept by the student's advisor. Each student had an advisor, a main advisor, that was like their mentor and was in charge of their card. They were like that personal counselor, a guidance counselor.

Teri, a finalist for Texas Teacher of the Year, and an art teacher at the VADP, reported in a *TorchBearer* article that she always felt she needed to honor the diversity of her students; sometimes by encouraging them and other times it was just through listening. Another retired teacher who taught at the VADP mentioned in an article in the *TorchBearer* that the academy has master teachers that act as guides and mentors to the student at the VADP. Jacob felt that assigning students to a teacher was critical to their success:

> That student that has a teacher that's a coach or mentor or whatever you want to call them, and they are responsible for that kid and everything about that child. That's how you keep kids as number one in mind.

Poppy felt that this relationship with students also tied in with the founding director's philosophy that teachers were professionals that could be trusted to do a professional job: "She believed in us enough that she trusted us to make those decisions, and allowed us to guide students so that we could make their journey through this process as painless as possible." Poppy also felt that this helped establish a personal connection with each student:

> We were the first face that they saw when they came in, or at least the first adult face, so that we could greet them and then when they left we could check out with them, so there was always a start and end. It was just that personal connection.

Student value. The second subtheme from the theme of teacher–student relationship was student value. Rutledge et al. (2015) stated that when there is a strong teacher–student relationship in which "teachers and students know each other well and adults express care and concern for student . . . student engagement is enhanced" (pp. 1063–1064). Other researchers also found that strong teacher–student relationships improve engagement (Maatta & Uusiautti, 2012; Quin, 2017).

A student named Monique wrote in a letter published in the *TorchBearer* that she wanted to thank the teachers for making her feel that she had worth. In another *TorchBearer* article, Dr. Jay M. Lewallen, Vice President of the Southwest Research Institute said the VADP teachers continually acknowledge that the students have something valuable to offer. He continued by saying that it was evident in the way the teachers communicate with the students and in the way they encourage student participation in community service.

Another way students are valued is by allowing them to participate and present in national conferences. The *TorchBearer* had an article discussing how students have the opportunity to share ideas in state and national conferences about what contributed to their withdrawal from the traditional high school. They also shared information about the strategies at the VADP helping them to complete school at the VADP.

The VADP staff showed how they valued students by encouraging them to consider themselves lifetime members of the VADP. A student's experience at the VADP did not have to end when they graduated. Poppy expanded on this point: "Once a VADPer always a VADPer. Come back. Call us if you need anything. Life advice, what to do next, if you need contacts." In addition, Poppy went on to say that it is "very important to us that students have a plan to go forward, whether that includes school, whether it includes military, family, it wasn't just a drop-

off point. And I think it is very, very important." Isaac mentioned that the district has what he called, a mantra:

> "Every child, every day"; and every time I hear that I'm like that was a VADP thing really, because that's really what I equate it to. That's really what we did here. We cried with kids, we lived life, we did life with kids.

The students felt that care, that valuation of their lives. Sophia described an encounter with a former student when she came for her interview to be a teacher at the VADP. She met him in the hallway and said, "I'm thinking about coming to teach at this school, what are your thoughts about this school? He said, 'Well, this school saved my life. That's easy.'"

Positive and encouraging. The subtheme of being positive and encouraging was the third subtheme under the main theme of teacher–student relationships. Aarela et al. (2016) explained that "eventually, preventing students from dropping out of school is a matter of small, intentional, and timely acts" (p. 15). Schools cannot afford to neglect the spirits and souls of their students. "Supportive environments are a very important part of the school climate. This [a supportive environment] will allow students to work more closely with their teachers, develop relationships, and create climates which do not alienate students" (Duhon, 1997, p. 35). In a student testimonial, Angela, a 19-year-old VADP student stated that the VADP is like a second home. A home where the staff, faculty, and students all show love, support and concern.

One student stated in a year-end report that the VADP helped her in developing the confidence and faith in her ability to graduate. Another student mentioned that the teachers helped him the most; that they always had something positive to say. He offered his thanks for them being so supportive and uplifting. Yet another student claimed that what helped her was the teachers' ability to make her feel like an individual instead of just a number. This student

mentioned that everyone at the Academy greeted her with a smile and they all seem glad that she was at school. She finished up by mentioning that the attitude of the faculty and staff were key in making her want to succeed. In another student testimonial, 20-year-old Michele thanked the Academy staff for their constant support. She acknowledged that they gave her the extra boost she needed to graduate.

Debbie, the founding director, talked about what visitors would see when they came: "They [visitors] specifically said, 'You can feel the difference when you walk in the door.' By that, they meant it was comfortable. It was welcoming. The kids were happy. They [the visitors] were surprised. The kids were happy."

Teachers care. That teachers care is the final subtheme under the theme of teacher–student relationships. According to Fay and Funk (1995), students who do not have a good level of self-esteem will not usually succeed, but such students will work for someone they love or respect. Glasser (1993) stated, "When anyone works hard for another person . . . the amount of effort they put out depends to a great extent on: 1. How well they know the person they are working for. 2. How much they like what they know" (p. 30).

Students at the VADP have put in their own words how they feel about the VADP teachers. In a letter published in one VADP year-end report, a former student, Suzy, wrote that the staff was very compassionate and understanding. She said that she felt like the usual labels of student and teacher were dropped and there was a bond, instead, between friends.

In another student testimonial, the student was surprised at how involved the teachers were with their students. In yet another testimonial, an unidentified student stated that it was the support of the teachers that gave her the determination to finish school. She stated that they not

only cared about her academically, but they also cared about her personally, and how she was doing both physically and emotionally. She, too, described the teachers as friends.

In another student testimonial, 18-year-old Steve shared his opinion that having a caring teacher, like those at the VADP, helps students want to learn. Similarly, 20-year-old Terry (in his testimonial) said that teachers were always there to help him finish up his work. He also mentioned that the instructors were more than just teachers; they were loving and caring friends.

Others have expressed their gratitude for the caring teachers at VADP. In a letter from a parent published in a VADP year-end report, the parent shared her thoughts about students like her son having the opportunity to complete school at the VADP. She said that students at the VADP were assisted by master teachers who embraced the diversity of their students. Because of this, those students began to hold their heads high. The Academy itself recognizes the importance of caring teachers. In a year-end report, they indicated that all staff members present at the New Student Orientation, during which they begin to develop a family-type bond with the new students.

For Sophia, that caring for students was a strong reason for wanting to teach at the VADP:

> I really value the collaborative nature of it, but one of the things that to me personally was the caring aspect towards the students. If they had something going on, there was an immediate person that they could go to for help.

Theme 3: Innovative Curriculum

The third theme that emerged from the data was that of an innovative curriculum. Raywid (1994b) and Watson (2011) indicated that successful alternative schools engage in innovative and creative practices. Raywid (1994b) and Wehlage et al. (1989) indicated that

successful alternative schools have compelling, rigorous curriculum; innovative and cross-curricular teaching; and experiential learning. Many authors have linked innovative classroom instruction to success in preventing drop-outs (Cook, 2013; DeAngelis, 2012; Hong, 2012; Rutledge et al., 2015; Scogin, 2016).

Teacher-designed. The first subtheme under the theme of innovative curriculum was that the curriculum is teacher-designed. Isaac, a science teacher at the VADP was able to establish a partnership with Sea World of San Antonio as a part of the Aquatic Science class. Isaac explained, "The students are able to spend 4 days at Sea World participating in behind-the-scenes activities that greatly enhance their learning experience." According to Siena, "Teachers have the freedom here to adjust the curriculum to make it work for the individual student."

The founding director felt that curriculum was one of the keys to success in a nontraditional program. Debbie explained that staff development was extremely important in curriculum development: "The staff development was key in that we learned everything we could about curriculum and what was successful. We found learning styles, how we affected community, the students, and the way that they learned." Evie remarked that it was helpful in building curriculum to know the needs of the students: "As an advisor, I could get an idea of what this student was about. That helped us build curriculum in this school. I thought it played a big part in getting success."

Students at the VADP were also required to do community service as a graduation requirement. One of the innovation curriculum designs was to tie subject matter directly into the community service. The VADP partnered with several agencies, one of which was a partnership with Habitat for Humanity, building homes. Not only was that used for community service, but

math teacher Evie also used it in her curriculum: "Oh, and boy, did I turn that into a math lesson. All that Habitat for Humanity stuff."

Student-oriented. The second subtheme to emerge was that innovative curricula is student-oriented. Successful alternative schools, according to Aron (2006), use "a whole student approach that builds a sense of affiliation and features individual instruction, self-paced work, and career counseling" (p. 4). Talking about how the VADP views incoming students, Siena, a VADP teacher, stated,

> Each student's needs are treated individually as they come in. It is not, "you are juniors so you are going to follow this path, and you are seniors so you are going to follow this path." Each student is interviewed and a plan is put in place for that student.

Isaac, a science teacher at VADP, said teachers were "given the freedom to try new things and innovative things. We were encouraged to do whatever was right by the student so long as you taught the standards that the state said were important and required." Additionally, Isaac stated, "The teachers were more flexible with regards to the curriculum, and helped create in-house, home-based, if you will, so they gave us some flexibility to cater to our students' needs."

Teachers were encouraged to do cross-curricular lessons. As Elsa recounted,

> It was heavily encouraged when I first started. We were able to combine stuff from both classes. It was co-mingling our classes so that students could complete classes faster. I thought that was a very wonderful curriculum that was talked about in other schools, but not really practiced. Here it was.

The approach was not just cross-curricular, but also practical, with real world applications. According to Isaac,

> I taught web design for many years, and we would always encourage the student to go find somebody who needs a website. Don't just do it as a dog-and-pony show for a grade. Go find somebody who needs a website, who needs this resource.

Another part of innovative design was the individualized curriculum. Teachers were able to look at what students already had mastered and then take them from that point to the end-of-the-course requirements. As Poppy explained, the students "were able to take a pretest in order to find that out. To be able to see, 'You already know this information. We're not going to waste your time with that. We're just going to focus on the deficit in this curriculum.'" Evie added, "I was finally able to do what I wanted to do in that I could help with what the individual needed."

Students at the VADP have also mentioned the innovative curriculum. In an unidentified student testimonial, a student said, "At VADP I was able to use my whole brain learning style to accelerate my learning through the curriculum." The student felt that this empowered him to take charge of his future. In an article in the *TorchBearer* regarding the hands-on segment of the VADP Aquatic Science course held at Sea World, Jenny, one of the students, remarked that students were able to have a totally hands-on experience. She felt that it was a great way to learn. In another student testimonial, 18-year-old Steve was impressed with the VADP philosophy that working at one's own pace allows a more complete learning experience.

Another example of innovative curriculum is in the additional, nonacademic programs at the VADP. One such program is called "Life after VADP." As a part of this program, students visit college campuses, area businesses, and various apprenticeship programs, accompanied by staff members or members of the corporate council.

Flexible. The third subtheme under the theme of innovative curriculum was that it is flexible. Isaac, a computer teacher at the VADP, said that the founding director gave the

teachers "artistic freedom. She would help the teachers evaluate the things that were effective and the things that weren't so effective."

Students particularly enjoyed the flexibility of the curriculum at the VADP. In a student testimonial, 19-year-old Aaron stated that VADP offered him a work environment that was suited to him. He mentioned that students at the VADP could work in any of the different classrooms even if it was not the classroom where the subject teacher worked. Aaron also said that receiving one-on-one teacher assistance helped him get to graduation. Another student enjoyed the flexible hours that were offered at the VADP. Toby, an 18-year-old student, in his testimonial, stated the flexible hours helped him complete his course work while it allowed him to manage his work schedule that he needed to maintain to provide financial support.

Teachers liked the flexibility of the curriculum as well. As Isaac explained, "You have the flexibility to do that and to individualize that for certain students. Some students were more engaged and more excited about something like that."

Theme 4: Empowered and Engaged Students

The fourth theme found in the data was empowered and engaged students. As students begin to develop academic strength, they can begin to accept ownership for their education. Before students can feel ownership, they need to believe in themselves. As Kozacek and Specht (2016) stated, "We need to start with building self-efficacy before we can focus on self-advocacy" (p. 6). High-performing schools work with students to develop student ownership (Nakkula, 2012; Rutledge & Cannata, 2016). Nakkula (2012) said that students are more successful when they have an authentic voice: "a voice that tells the student this motivation is mine, this engagement comes from me, these accomplishments are of my own direction and making" (p. 63).

School of choice. The first subtheme within the theme of empowered and engaged students is that they choose to attend the particular school. In a comment in a year-end report, the founding director asked those reading the report to imagine a school that students and staff choose to attend. Imagine a school where the teacher might learn as much as the student. Imagine a school in which the community is actively involved in the educational process. She concluded her remarks by saying that one does not need to imagine because VADP is such a place.

Students who are interested in attending the VADP must go through a process. It is a school of choice. First they must contact the Academy, either on their own or through their base-school counselor. Then they visit with the VADP counselor and tour the school. At that point, they may fill out an application for the Academy. An article in the *TorchBearer* explained how students are enrolled in the VADP. When vacancies occur at the VADP, the counselor invites prospective students to attend a multi-day orientation program to learn about the VADP before they are enrolled. Students are extended an invitation to attend the Academy. Those who come are required to write a mission statement on their first day that is focused on their plans for the future. Poppy added,

> The student is not directed here for one reason or another. The student has to apply, has to come in and have an interview, and fill out an application. It's not just a given that a student will get to come to VADP. They have to go through the process of it.

Siena would tell her students,

> We are totally a school of choice. The teachers go through the same thing: We have to apply here. We have to interview here. We have to be chosen to be here. We're totally

> here because we all chose to be here and because we are chosen to be here. Let's make the most of it.

Not only did students choose to come to the academy, but they have choices available within the program. As Jacob explained,

> Some kids don't like to focus on six periods a day at one time. They may want to take two classes or two classes at a time and it goes until they're finished and we allow that at the Academy.

In orientation, new students are told what is expected of them and what they can expect of the program. Often the program is presented as a kind of outline. According to Jacob, "We tell the students that they are going to be the people that color in the outline."

Select curriculum. The second subtheme for the theme of empowered and engaged students was the ability to select curriculum. High-performing schools work with students to develop student ownership (Nakkula, 2012; Rutledge & Cannata, 2016). When students feel that they are in control of the goals and work they tend to be more successful (Chan et al., 2014; J. S. Lee, 2012; Nakkula, 2012; Toshalis & Nakkula, 2012). J. S. Lee (2012) stated, "Student engagement is a robust predictor of student success at school" (p. 331).

The founding director talked about a collaboration between a student and a council member in order to develop a curriculum to enable the student to get an elective credit. According to Debbie,

> What we had those two do was write down how they were going to earn that credit and how architects can be the focus. Together, they wrote a plan, the two of them, but that was one of the very first innovative studies that we have at allowing students a part of being in charge.

Debbie continued, "We wrote curriculum so that it would have more opportunity for choice and for the students."

Students at the VADP have repeatedly stated that they feel like they have authentic input into the educational process. In her testimonial, Lizzie, a 20-year-old student, said the academy offered a whole new way of learning. She had input not only in what her class schedule would be, but with the teachers' help, she was able to use her own learning style to enhance her education. She felt that was an ideal way to learn. In another student testimonial, 21-year-old Lucy stated that at the VADP, students are allowed to take two classes at a time and to choose in what order they would take those classes. Students were also allowed to choose how many hours they would attend each day (4 hours minimum) to complete a 20-hour week. She felt this self-paced program really helped students graduate.

Celebrate success. The final subtheme under empowered and engaged students was celebrating the success of the students. The staff at the VADP celebrate the success of their students in several ways. One of the ways they celebrate is to recognize students in the *TorchBearer*, the VADP newsletter that is published three to four times a year. In one issue they praised student performance on the state-mandated test. The article highlighted that student scores improved dramatically from previous testing. For example, one student scored 310 points higher than her previous score on the writing test. Another student gained 260 points and earned academic recognition on the test. The teachers involved in the special study groups preparing the students for the test gave credit to the students. It was through their efforts and positive attitudes that they were able to score so well.

Students are also involved in scholarship opportunities that are recognized by the newsletter. One academy student was among a group awarded over $32,000 in scholarships

during a youth conference at a local college. Students were recognized in other competitions as well. In a district-wide art competition, the VADP had seven entries. Of the seven, four won blue ribbons, two won red ribbons, and one was awarded a yellow ribbon. In another *TorchBearer* article, students were recognized for their achievements in a DECA Inc. competition. Academy when four students won the District 2 DECA Inc. competition. Another article recognized student's academic achievements when 100% of the students taking the state mandated test passed all three areas of reading, math, and writing.

VDAP also announces graduates over the school PA system on the day they complete their diploma requirements. According to 18-year-old Jason, in his student testimonial, he was inspired by watching other students graduate and hearing the teachers announce every time a student graduated. He said that if inspiring other students was the intent of the PA announcements, it worked for him.

Theme 5: Community Involvement

Community involvement was the fifth theme to emerge from the data. Discussing principal leadership that sustained success, Garza et al. (2013) commented on the importance of leaders building community, "Another important dimension was building community. These principals reached out to their communities. They clearly understood that they could not succeed in isolation" (p. 798).

Partnerships. The first subtheme under the theme of community involvement was partnerships. According to Leo, "The founding design team members published a document one of the tenets, was community involvement and a spirit of community and so that has persisted through the 26 odd years of the history of the school." The VADP has developed many partnerships with the community. They have the AACC composed of educators, retired

educators, businesspeople, and political leaders. The AACC was founded in 1991. It is a community-supported organization that serves the VADP. According one of the year-end reports, the AACC supports the basic missions of the academy, including teaching character development, civic responsibility, and community involvement. AACC members comprise business and community leaders, parents of current and former VADP students, other academics, current students, and alumni of the VADP.

Siena explained that the founding director

> built a larger community with our corporate council. They, in turn reached out into an even larger community in terms of administrator throughout the school district, and in terms of community leaders, church leaders, and business leaders who added support.

Part of the community outreach that the Council achieved is the development of scholarship opportunities for VADP graduates. An article in the *TorchBearer* reported that the AACC established a fund to award scholarships to VADP graduates. The AACC partnered with a local community college district to create matching funds with the district. According to the agreement, the local community college district and the school district will match funds, dollar for dollar, awarded to VADP graduates who attend one of the district colleges. In addition to working with the AACC, students participate in community service activities as a graduation requirement. In an issue of the *TorchBearer* and also in a year-end report, the community service activities were highlighted. Students volunteered at several elementary school Bike Rodeos, and an Easter Egg Hunt at the Children's Intervention Center. During the 1999–2000 school year, students at the VADP participated in community service with 29 different organizations and activities.

Referring to the requirement for community service, Jacob mentioned that they also used that for public relations, and that the VADP was requiring community service before other schools started making that a requirement: "We also put kids in Academy t-shirts any time we take them out. To be at the Academy, they need to learn how to do community service because we required community service when none of the other schools required it." Talking about the requirement for graduation, Max mentioned it as one of the things he remembered most. VADP had students donate food and gifts for families for Christmas, and he had the opportunity to escort the students when they delivered the donations. Max stated, "That was satisfying for me, but just to see the kids' reaction, the students' reaction, to see how a family appreciated what they were doing. It still stands out as one of the highlights of my 4 years here."

In a year-end report, it was stated that during the 1995–1996 school year, the VADP partnered with community and academic organizations. By the 2004–2005 school year, the VADP partnered with 58 community and academic organizations. Those partnerships resulted in such diverse activities as mentoring, volunteering, in-kind contributions, financial donations, and professional support.

The VADP has developed community partnerships by holding graduation exercises at different community locations. One year-end report identified 21 different sites for their 32 graduations. Sites included churches, community centers, businesses, local universities, museums, and theme parks.

Family. The second subtheme to emerge under community involvement was that of family. According to Raywid (1994b), successful alternative schools are able to create and sustain community. There are several characteristics of schools that generate and sustain community, including membership, caring places, places thought of as family-like, building

community, and strong teacher–student interactions (Barile et al., 2012; Daggett, 2015; Garza et al., 2013; Louis et al., 2016; Murphy & Torres, 2014; Quin, 2017; Rutledge et al., 2015; Wilkins, 2014; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). The parent of one of the first VADP graduates as well as an educator in the district stated in a year-end report that she was professionally involved with many students at risk of dropping out of school in the district. She mentioned that she saw student self-esteem plummet as a result of failing in school. When these students become part of the VADP family, through their active engagement in their own educational success, their self-esteem also increases.

As Siena remarked, "One of the great things about VADP is how we treat each other as family. Not just among the staff, but among the students as well." Evie added her sentiments to this theme: "I appreciated the familial situation that we had here. Many of students needed a lot of love and attention. If they found [that love] in one of us, we were only too glad that they found it." Continuing the idea of family at the VADP, Poppy said that one could always count on other staff members: "We were a family. Probably a dysfunctional family a lot of times, but you knew that you could depend on anybody in that group. We had each other's back and we were a family." A *TorchBearer* article addressed how students learn to work as a team toward success. Together, they learn to accept the unique talents of each other during the new student orientation program that features a family atmosphere.

Theme 6: Public Relations

The VADP felt that letting the community know of the successes of the Academy was almost as important as the successes themselves. Debbie explained, "You need to toot your own horn. You have to let people know about your successes so they will be more willing to support your future." In the first year-end report (referred to as a process guide at that time), the VADP

stated that it is important to get support from both the community and the school district in order to secure the staff and resources to adequately serve the students of the school. This first year-end report identified public relations as a key to the program success.

Toot your own horn. The first subtheme under the theme of public relations was letting the community know of one's successes, or "tooting your own horn." The VADP uses many different methods to publicize their successes. They use a newsletter published three or four times a year to tout the success of their students, the AACC, their teachers, and the program itself. The academy had staff members give presentations to civic groups, high schools in the district, other schools in the region, and the Texas Alternative Education Association.

A member of the selection committee that hired the founding director talked about how the founding director got her school in the public eye. According to Jacob,

> She was very good at marketing her program . . . you have to get other people on board. She would reach out there and get people on board . . . other people would say, "I want to be a part of that, I want to see it be a success."

The teachers also mentioned that public relations was a key to success. Poppy stated, "Something that I didn't appreciate at the time but have come to appreciate now, is she was very good at getting us out there in the public eye, getting our name out there, getting our. . . . She was very good at making sure people knew that we were here and what we were doing." Agreeing with Poppy, Isaac stated,

> In fact, I remember her saying, "No one's going to toot your horn. You've got to do it for yourself." She wholeheartedly believed that the staff were the rock stars that we know we are, that people knew about us.

Sophia mentioned that the founding director was really uncomfortable with public relations, but felt it was a key to the continuing success of VADP: "And she hated that part of it herself. That was not an easy thing for her, for her personality, but she knew the importance of it, what she did. And she insisted that we all do it."

The VADP used television and radio to gain visibility. Ava, one of the design team members, was very impressed with the founding director's ability to get coverage of VADP: "She was an expert at getting TV coverage for the graduation ceremonies. Over and over and over again." According to the first year-end report, the VADP was able to get television coverage of their graduation exercises. This coverage highlighted the success of former dropouts who had, through the VADP, earned their diplomas.

Another medium for public relations was the annual year-end report. Jacob explained, "We would use the year-end report as a tool that we use to encourage people to participate, encourage them to be on the academy corporate council, encourage them to donate money, time, effort or in-like contributions." Jacob also thought that running a school is a bit like running a business in that one had to show one was successful: "I've always thought, what happens in the schools is kind of like businesses. A business of no sign, is a sign of no business. And so, every year, we bring a year-end report."

Another tool the VADP used for public relations was an in-house newsletter. As Elsa stated,

> One of the things that she did to get people, in order to get people to understand our program, and I hated it, was the newsletter. Even though it was a pain to write, it was pure PR and that has stopped, and we don't have the recognition like we used to.

Award-winning. The second subtheme under public relations was that of being an award-winning program. According to the 15th anniversary edition of the year-end report, the Academy has been recognized with the following awards: Nationally recognized by the National Dropout Prevention Network as a model school; VADP founding director awarded the National Dropout Prevention Network Crystal Star Award for Excellence in Dropout Recovery, Intervention and Prevention; Founding director named HEB Excellence in Education Award Regional; VADP has captured three district Overall Teacher of the Year Awards; six District High School Teacher of the Year Awards; Two VADP teachers were named both Regional Teacher of the Year, State Teacher of the Year Finalists; Teachers at VADP have won three overall Trinity University Prize for Excellence in Teaching awards; and the University of Texas, Texas Excellence Award for Outstanding High School Teacher.

Poppy stated,

> Now, I appreciate the fact that all the awards that we got at this school, all the accolades that this school got were because she was putting us out there. She was making sure that the program was kept in a positive light and kept the funding.

Elsa agreed with that, but wanted to add that even though the founding director was often the focus of the limelight, it was because the program had to succeed: "It was, she's doing it . . . yeah, her name's going to be out there, but it's as the director of this amazing program, and you knew she would do what she needed no matter how anxious she got." Elsa also pointed out that the founding director felt it was important for all of the staff to get out there:

> You all need to give, and you all need to start applying for your own awards, even though that's really hard, because we need that name recognition. We need to stay top of mind, we need to stay top of mind.

The VADP is an award-winning program. It is a model for other programs. Evie talked about attending a conference with another VADP teacher. They were in a session being presented by an award-winning dropout prevention school and the title of the presentation was, "How to Begin an Alternative School That's Not a Punitive School." According to Evie,

> [The main presenter said], "Before we get started, I would like to introduce two people who are here from the school that we modeled our school on." The presenter, then she introduced the two of us. That was amazing, to get that kind of recognition."

Talking about the importance of being in the public eye, Elsa, an award-winning VADP teacher, said,

> Because when you're not, you're the alternative school. You're a school for those kids. You're the school for, "Oh, that kid with the straight F, that student. How can they even be successful?" When you stay top of mind, then they knew, and that's what made us an internationally recognized program.

Research Questions Responses

The research questions for the study were grounded in the gap that existed in dropout prevention program development literature. The central question was focused on how administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. The subquestions addressed more specific programs and policies that support the central question. The subquestion came from Raywid's (1994b) assertion that there are three main factors that create a successful alternative school. They also look at how teachers and administrators perceive a school leader develops these three factors. Although the teachers and administrators all mentioned the three factors of developing community, developing a climate for engaging and innovative curriculum, and broadening of

staff roles, they also mentioned a fourth factor that they felt was critical to the continuing success of a dropout prevention school: public relations. The following sections include discussion of the participants' responses used to answer the central and subquestions, as well as what they had to say about public relations.

Central Research Question

The central research question of this single instrumental case study was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program? All six themes found in the data addressed this question. The purpose of the central question was to determine if the participants felt that the founding director had developed policies and programs that would create a successful dropout prevention program. All participants indicated that it was very much the collaborative effort of the founding director, the district team charged with developing the VADP, and the original founding team that developed the policies and programs that allowed VADP to become a successful program. Jacob, one of the district leaders charged with creating the VADP said, "We were forging a brand new pathway which we didn't really have a map for. We had to create our own map and our own program." Jacob felt that to do so they needed an innovative, creative, leader.

> We needed somebody that was very collaborative with the teachers, that believes in empowering teachers, and that believes that everybody has something to say and ownership was really important, and the way you get people to have ownership is to have collaborative leadership.

Debbie, the founding director also felt that she had a collaborative leadership style:

> I like to think of my leadership style as collaborative because I do believe that four brains are better than one, and I like to have people with differing opinions, so we choose people with different learning and teaching styles, so that we get a broader picture of what's going on.

Ava, another member of the team charged with establishing VADP, agreed with Debbie's self-assessment. According to Ava,

> She empowered them to help make the decisions that went on in the school. She was very open. Open door policy on everything. She was not a rigid person or authoritarian person. It was, we're in this together, we're going to sink or swim.

Ava went on to say,

> She definitely was not someone who had all the answers. She was going to build her team with those initial educators. So she built her team. They went on conferences together and then they did a lot of huddling. Every day, they huddled to work out their strategies.

When asked specifically what she thought lead to the success of the VADP, Debbie, the founding director said,

> I think it was a collaboration of the teachers, and I include myself in that, the district, the community, and the students working together and philosophically aligned, that led to the successful program that it became, and highly recognized throughout the nation.

Other participants agreed with her; not only about the collaboration of teachers, but insuring that the right teachers were selected for the Academy.

When asked what specifically led to the success of the VADP, Evie said, "We, the staff, we would serve the needs of individual students." She went onto say that the founding director

carefully made sure that new staff would fit the VADP culture. Evie explained that there was a VADP personality:

> You had to have a natural belief that no child is ever going to fail. You just had to keep working with them until they were successful. And help them see their own success. And it is all in the choosing of the right person. We had a personality, to tell a student how much you cared about them without babying them.

Siena talked about how the VADP was founded with very few preconceived ideas:

> I think, first of all, it was founded on principles designed to address student need. It was sort of created out of a, "Hmm, what would happen if we tried this? What might occur if we did it this way instead of this other way?"

Siena went on to say that it was a very innovative program created to fill a niche for a specific student population: "I think staying true to that mission is what keeps us being successful." Jacob felt that the founding director was pivotal in the culture of VADP: "She certainly shaped the culture of the academy. We knew that she had the creative center, and she did have kids come in and out and she has to be able to hone them into that culture."

The VADP's graduation rate was an area that Elsa thought contributed to its success. When asked what specifically led to the success of the VADP, Elsa said,

> It's our graduation rate. We take students that have fallen through the cracks. At-risk students and dropouts, and we get them to be successful. Through word of mouth we get more students in the same situation and we work with them and make sure that they are successful in earning their high school diploma.

Research Subquestion 1

The first subquestion of the study was: How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader nurtures a sense of community that fosters success in a dropout prevention program? Theme 2: Teacher–student relations addressed many of the programs the VADP developed to create and strengthen teacher–student relationships in this subquestion. Theme 4: Empowered and engaged students and Theme 5: Community involvement are other key themes used to answer Subquestion 1. The many responses of the participants fell into four general categories: family or family-like; the AACC and other leaders; the larger community; and the forgiving nature of the founding director.

Many of the participants mentioned the familial aspect of the VADP. Siena stated, "One of the great things about VADP is how we treat each other as family. Not just among the staff but among the students as well." And, like family, participants felt that at the time, the VADP was somewhat dysfunctional. As Poppy explained,

> We were a family. We were a family. We had our differences. Probably a dysfunctional family a lot of times, but you knew that you could depend on anybody in that group. You knew that if something was going on, you knew they had your back. Everybody was in this for the kids, but that we had each other's back and that we were a family. She really fostered that.

There was a genuine feeling of care and compassion among the staff and students. Evie explained,

> The culture was all for one and one for all. Everybody even the teachers really seemed to care about each other. If there was something that needed to be done, well, we would just do it. Most of the students cared about each other and cared about their teachers.

Elsa stated,

> We encouraged one another and we were very proactive for the students. We have a feeling of community within the staff, within our advisory council, and with the students . . . we were a big happy family, sometimes dysfunctional, but we were always family. Always a community that worked together, for the success of our students.

This feeling of family and caring toward students was particularly an important aspect of the VADP for Sophia:

> I really value the collaborative nature of it, but one of the things that to me personally was the caring aspect towards the students. Not necessarily curriculum, but if they had something going on, there was an immediate person that they could go to for help.

Sophia continued to talk about her experience in a larger school where administrators, teachers, and counselors were often too busy to provide immediate help for a student with emotional issues: "So that the immediate response is very important to me, and then to know what happens because of the collaborative nature to know that this child has been taken care of, and what the she needs is available."

Although the participants enjoyed the familial feeling at the VADP, some of the teachers were overwhelmed when they first encountered the culture. According to Poppy,

> I thought . . . I thought I had joined a cult when I first started at VADP, we had to get into a circle and we were rumbaing. I honestly was looking around going, "Oh my lord, I've gotten drawn into a cult." It wasn't until last year when I had circle training that I finally understand circles.

In a rapid exchange [with almost constant laughter] in answer to the question, How would you describe the culture that the founding director developed?; the following overlapping answers

came out quickly: Male: "A very culty culture"; Female: "A pleasantly dysfunctional family"; Male: "We put the cult in culture." Finally, Evie said,

> I think the director would laugh at that. I think she would get a kick out of it. To this day, I could call her at 2:00 in the morning and she would show up. She would for any of us.

Part of this caring and familial feeling was developed when students first started at the VADP.

All students started in a small 10–15 person cohort. The cohort would go through an orientation. Although it went through several iterations, it usually lasted 3–5 days. During this orientation, students would learn the history and culture of the VADP. A *TorchBearer* article addressed the new student orientation program. At the time, it cover 24 hours over several consecutive days. Students worked in teams to find successful solutions. They learned to accept the unique talents of each other and honor that diversity in a family atmosphere.

The students came from all over the district and part of the purpose of the orientation was to meld them into a cohesive unit. Evie stated,

> But by the end of our orientation they were very excited about being from Verizon and saying, "I'm from Verizon." They wanted to wear t-shirts with Verizon printed on it. We would hear them talking, "I think I am going to tell my friend, Sally or Joe or whatever, I'm going to tell them they need to come here. This is just the right place."

In addition to a need to buy into the mission of the new school, teachers felt the individual students were often needy as well. Evie remarked, "I appreciated the familial situation that we had here. Many of the students needed a lot of love and attention. If they found [that love] in one of us, we were only too glad that they found it."

The orientation was conceived of by the founding director, with input from her staff. Jacob explained,

> We did an orientation with kids that came in, we told them all about the academy, we told them what they would be able to do there, we told them how empowered they could be and then we also told them that anytime it didn't look like they were part of the culture, we would tell them that's not the academy way.

According to a year-end report, each staff member presents at the new student orientation. Through that participation and interaction with the students, a bond develops between the students and the staff members. Through this bonding, the students begin to feel as though the Academy is a second home, and the culture and climate of the VADP is established. Ava stated, "That's building friendships. That's building togetherness with the orientation. That was all her idea, the orientation. And then, once a week, they would come in for assembly, that's community building."

A big part of the orientation was to get the students thinking in a new direction: a student-oriented direction. As Sophia explained,

> The idea was to change the paradigm for the students before they started school. It was several days long, 3 or 4. I think the number of days fluctuated over the years, but at least three . . . with the idea that it would take that long for them to shift their thinking from a teacher led classroom to a student, to being responsible for their problems.

Another purpose of the orientation was to remind students why they were there. One of the first things students would do at orientation was get their picture taken in a cap and gown. According to Ava, "They'd put on their cap and gown. That's a building of expectation . . . that you're here to graduate. That's what we're all about is, you're here to graduate. And don't forget it."

Orientation was also a way to help the students look to the future. The VADP had much of its basis in the seven habits theory by Covey (1989). Sophia explained,

> The "Seven Habits" ["The Seven Habits of Highly Successful People" by Steven R Covey] . . . but it was part of all our experience with teaching the kids and how to be successful people. The director did not allow too much straying, we had a lot of independence our classroom, but we did not have a lot of independence on the direction of the school. That was set and that was taught to every one of them.

All staff members were required to write mission statements. During orientation, students also had that requirement. Ava recalled,

> And they also write their mission statement. That's part of community building, is their mission statement. And that's all posted at graduation . . . is their picture in cap and gown, and their mission statement. I think that's very. . . . And so the parents can read all that. And people from the community can read all that. It's really neat.

The parent of one of the first VADP graduates and an educator in the district stated in a year-end report that she was professionally involved with many students at risk of dropping out of school in the district. She mentioned that she saw student self-esteem plummet as a result of failing in school, but when these students become part of the VADP family, through their active engagement in their own educational success, their self-esteem increased. In an unidentified student testimonial, a former VADP student said, the love found at the VADP made her a strong, independent person. One who embraces her God. She felt confident that she would be able to go forward into the future with joy and happiness in her heart.

There were several other ways that the VADP made students feel a part of the VDAP family. Students were told repeatedly that once they had been accepted at the VADP they were considered a part of the VADP family forever. As Poppy stated,

> Once a VADPer always a VADPer. Come back. Call us if you need anything. Life advice, what to do next, if you need contacts. I think that was thanks to that great foundation our job is not just to help them get that diploma, our job is to help them be successful for their entire life.

Poppy went on to say that graduation was not a drop-off point for students of the VADP. The VADP worked to make sure students had a plan going forward. Poppy explained,

> It was very important to us, and it's still very important to us that students have a plan to go forward, rather than a plan included work, whether that includes school, whether it includes military, family. And I think it is very, very important. It was something that was really big, and very impressive, still to this day.

As part of the feeling of family, the VADP tracks its graduates. In their newsletter they often feature news of graduates.

Isaac talked about a district adage that he realizes was, at VADP, much more than just an adage:

> Our school district has a mantra, I call a mantra, "every child every day," and every time I hear that I'm, like, that was a VADP thing really, because that's really what I equate it to. That's really what we did here. We cried with kids, we lived life, we did life with kids.

The teachers also talked about a student led conference held with the student when they completed graduation requirements. According to Evie,

> Yeah that was it, usually with the advisor, and another teacher or two and they would talk about what brought him to VADP, what his experience was like here and what their plans are, always what their plans are. Those were always very meaningful. And the students could pick who they wanted to be there.

Students did accept that they were a part of the VADP family and often did return. They would seek advice or sometimes just come to visit. Sophia mentioned meeting a student who was a VADP graduate when she came to interview for her position:

> When I came for my interview it was after school, and there was a student who came by to visit. I was just talking to him and he had graduated. And I said, I'm thinking about coming to teach at this school, I am interviewing and I am hoping to come to this school, what are your thoughts about this school? He said, "Well, this school saved my life. That's easy."

One of the things the founding director established, as an outreach to the community at large, was the AACC. Ava recalled, "She formed the advisory council, who made up of businesses, and educators, and government, and various people, and empowered all of those people to be part of the school." Jacob explained more about the Council:

> But what they were, were people in the community that would go out and continue that PR and soon talk about different successful ways to reinvent public education to be a real successful program for students at a nontraditional school that are not being able to serve appropriately, so the Academy Corporate Council became the, for lack of a better word, the Parent-Teacher Organization.

Teachers also acknowledged the support of the Council. According to Siena, the founding director

> built a larger community with our corporate council. They, in turn, reached out into an even larger community in terms of administrators throughout the school district, and in terms of community leaders, church leaders, and business leaders who added support.

The Council also helped raise money for scholarships, as well as reaching out to the local community, and acting as mentors for the students. According to the *TorchBearer*, the AACC established a fund to award scholarships to VADP graduates. The AACC partnered with a local community college district to create matching funds with the district. The agreement states that the local community college district and the school district will match funds, dollar for dollar, awarded to VADP graduates who attend one of the district colleges. The founding director talked about other help from the council. Debbie explained,

> We wanted the support of the business community, so that they could help the students, mentor the students, they could help with scholarships. They would know what we were about and they could spread the word as well. That became part of the team, they became part of the team.

They were also helpful in helping finding solutions to problems. Debbie continued,

> We wanted also the advisory council to help solve problems. If there were something we were struggling with, say, senior attendance, we might bring that up to the council and get some ideas, and actually they'd come up with incentives and maybe form a committee and study the issue.

The founding director of the VADP also reached out to other administrators in the district. The VADP would hold open houses and invite parents, high school counselors, and

> other people from the district to come over and interact with the kids, so they could go back to their schools and talk at their teacher meetings about what we were, so they

> would refer students who were right for the program, so that the student would be successful.

From the very beginning of the VADP it was a core tenet to have students involved in community service. Leo stated,

> Well I know one of the founding design team members they published a document. But within that document that was one of the tenets, was community involvement and a spirit of community and so that has persisted through the 26 odd years of the history of the school.

During the 1995–1996 school year, the VADP partnered with community and academic organizations. By the 2004–2005 school year, the VADP partnered with 58 community and academic organizations. According to one year-end report, the AACC is involved in mentoring, volunteering, in-kind contributions, financial donations, and professional support to the academy. The VADP has developed community partnerships by holding graduation exercises at different community locations. A year-end report identified 21 different sites for their 32 graduations. Sites included churches, community centers, businesses, local universities, museums, and theme parks. The founding director, Debbie, talked about how Jacob would use students to promote community: "He also invited the students to come and participate in any events that the district had. For example, Memorial Day, Labor Day, they would often read different . . . be involved in different parts of that event. They became well known, in a positive way." In one of those types of events, students from the VADP participated in a ceremony to name a literacy center. One activity that the VADP students participated in was reported in the *TorchBearer*. Four students lived a lesson on local government when they spoke to the local city council in support of an ordinance naming the city's seventh literacy center after a former AACC member.

Participants also recalled how students were often showcased in community activities around the district and the community. Sophia remarked, "It seems like when they were recognized, when our students would do the pledge at the board meetings for the school district, we all showed up in our red, white, and blue to support our students who were there." Poppy added that staff were expected to show up at these events and help raise awareness of the VADP: "You are all there, you sat together, you all wore red, white, and blue because she wanted to make sure we were very visual. She'd remind everybody that we are here." Jacob reiterated that the VADP required community service long before other schools were requiring it, and that it was a way to get a positive image of the academy out into the community:

> We also put kids in Academy t-shirts any time we take them out. To be at the Academy, they need to learn how to do community service because we require community service when none of the other schools required it.

Students participate in community service activities as a graduation requirement. According to different articles in the *TorchBearer*, students volunteered at several elementary school Bike Rodeos partnered with a local service organization as well as an Easter Egg Hunt at the Children's Intervention Center, and also designed the logo for the city-wide Youth Tobacco Summit.

A 19-year-old student, Eddy, in a student testimonial, mentioned how he enjoyed participation in the many community service activities. He was able to speak at the President's Commission on National and Community Service. He attended and presented to educators at the Texas Association of Alternative Education Conference, he explained the VADP program to the local district administrators at their monthly meeting. He also had the opportunity to speak to a PALS group at a local high school.

Ava also mentioned some of the success stories that are part of the VADP community. She talked about a young man who was a budding opera star. He would get small parts with organizations and would be on the road, missing a lot of school. Ava explained, "He was losing his credits. But this was perfect for him. He could breeze right through Verizon and get his credits and graduate. He has a fabulous voice, obviously." She mentioned another student who had gone on to start his own underwater welding company.

Ava was especially proud of the fact that graduates from VADP had come back to the district as teachers: "We have two or three teachers who are teaching in the system." Ava finished up with the observation that

> if they had dropped out, not gotten a high school diploma, who knows what would have happened to them. It's a way of looking at school differently. A traditional high school is not the answer for everyone. That's what I think.

One of the things the founding director did to build community was that she was very forgiving. The teachers (Elsa, Evie, and Sophia) gave several examples about how teachers or staff had done things that would usually be considered way over the line, but the founding director used those situations as teaching and learning situations. One of those incidents involved the school registrar. After every graduation, the entire staff would meet for lunch and after lunch they would debrief the event. They would discuss what went well and what needed to be done better. All of the teachers had their phones off because they forgot to turn them on after graduation. The registrar was trying to get a hold of someone, anyone, because she had forgotten how to get to the restaurant. According to Elsa, when they returned to the school

> "she's [the registrar] screaming and we all have to move into another classroom because we still had to debrief and she [the founding director] calmly dealt with the registrar and

> calmed her down; somebody else might gone after them, then that person would be gone at the end of the year, but she [the founding director] took her time to make sure that that person was taken care of, and that person understood it was an accident. That was something I didn't forget.

Another incident involved a very young Spanish teacher who was new to the VADP. Evie said that she was using the school's email to email her boyfriend. In that email she said some bad things about the director. According to Evie, "This is kind of a young person badmouthing, but what she said, she could've been fired." As sometimes happens, this teacher hit the wrong button and it went to the director's computer. Once she received it, the director called the Spanish teacher in and talked to her. Evie recalled,

> She was just more than kind. I forget exactly what was said and how it was said, but I dared not say anything like that about any principal I ever had. She said she's just young and she had learned her lesson. Her attitude towards that teacher never changed after that.

Elsa indicated that a similar thing happened to her. The VADP's school colors were red, white, and blue. The founding director was quite adamant that on school spirit day and during off-campus events everyone should wear the school colors. On school spirit day Elsa put on a sweater that hid her red, white, and blue blouse. She went into the front office and the director disciplined her for covering the red, white, and blue. Elsa was quite upset over the whole thing and decided to instant message her mentor: "I was kind of new to instant messaging and I complained about her, and instead of my mentor I inadvertently sent it to her." Elsa recalled that when she realized what she had done, she almost started crying. She immediately received a

phone call to report to the office. Worried and concerned, she thought she was going to be fired or, at the very least, reprimanded. Instead, according to Elsa,

> She's, like, "You know what? It's okay to vent. We all vent." She knew that there was potential in you and so she wasn't going to chop your head off, make you go somewhere, or kick you out of education. She just wouldn't.

Research Subquestion 2

The second subquestion of the study was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader cultivates an environment that enables teachers to develop creative, engaging, and innovative curricula? Theme 1: High-quality teachers, and Theme 3: Innovative curriculum are addressed in this section. The participants' responses indicated that there were three closely related ideas about the curriculum. Participants mentioned that from the beginning they were encouraged to create cross-curriculum lessons. They also emphasized that the curricula were very individualized. Third, they talked about curricula being relevant.

The founding director felt that the best way to develop innovative curriculum was through staff development. According to Debbie,

> The staff development was key in that we learned everything we could about curriculum and what was successful. We found learning styles, how we effected community, the students, and the way that they learned, but also have a broader idea so that they could style flex.

Jacob echoed her sentiments about teaching the teachers:

> We focus first on students, but you have to focus on your staff. You have to empower them to feel like they're in charge of creating individual kid's needs. It's not some kind of every book for every kid doesn't work. There are different styles.

Furthermore, Debbie added,

> One of the things we did when we first started was have a lot of professional development . . . studied curriculum and how to best implement that . . . They're not going to just sit at a computer all day, but they have a variety of ways to learn, so diversity. If they don't get it one way then we try it another way.

The participants also felt like they had a lot of freedom and support in how they developed curriculum. According to Leo,

> The curriculum development likewise, it was also more rewarding because you were given the freedom to try new things and innovative things. It was encouraged to do whatever was right by the student so long as you taught the standards that the state said were important and required.

Siena felt that the founding director wanted the teachers to be innovative and creative:

> I felt like she wanted us to be our most creative selves. She wanted us to open the oysters and find the pearls. She didn't care what the method was we used to open the oyster, but we were going to open it. She wanted teachers to feel the freedom to teach their content level, their correct content level, in the most creative, nontraditional way possible.

Siena went on to say that the founding director felt that all students had the capability of learning if the curriculum was presented in the right way:

> She believed that kids who failed in school only failed because they needed the information delivered in a different way. She wanted her teachers to not be afraid to try something new, something different, something weird, if it was going to help the student to learn and to help the student see himself as a learner.

Leo felt that, for the time frame, he was encouraged to interject technology into the curriculum:

> We would do technology and services and gear our curriculum delivery so that we could take full advantage of those resources. And so one piece that I remember developing was for our aquatic science class. I developed Shark Quest which was an interactive online series of lessons.

Students were required to do community service. VADP partnered with several agencies. One of the agencies they partnered with was Habitat for Humanity, to build homes. Not only was that used for community service, but math teacher Evie used it in her curriculum: "Oh, and boy, did I turn that into a math lesson. All that Habitat for Humanity stuff.

Both Elsa and Siena mentioned the use of project based learning in the curriculum and felt that, at the time it was innovative. Elsa stated, "One of them is the academic freedom that we have, and we are going towards project-based learning in order to make the curriculum more authentic in the students' lives. We make it rigorous." Siena remarked, "I guess the one that is forefront on my mind right now is our push towards PBL more and more and more. We've always had projects and that kind of thing."

The founding director talked about a collaboration between a student and a council member in order to develop a curriculum to enable the student to get an elective credit. According to Debbie, "What we had those two do was write down how they were going to earn that credit and how architects can be the focus. Together, they wrote a plan, the two of them, but that was one of the very first innovative studies that we have at allowing students a part of being in charge."

Participants felt that the curriculum at the VADP was more focused on the individual student. Debbie explained, "Each student had an individual curriculum plan, where they would

sit down with their advisor, and they would look at what they needed to complete." According to Evie,

> At the academy we were able to help each child address what they need not what they have already covered and succeeded. We would give them a test to see how much they did understand and then pick up the work where they were where they started falling apart. I mean, where they started to be unsuccessful, and the students appreciated that.

Participants appreciated that the individualization of the curriculum allows teachers to find out what a student knew and what the student did not know and to focus on what the student still needed to learn, for mastery.

Poppy put it this way:

> When it comes to finding out what a student already knows, here they were able to take a pretest in order to find that out. What we call placement. To be able to see, "You already know this information. We're not going to waste your time with that. We're just going to focus on the deficit in this curriculum.

This individualization allowed students to learn at their own pace, within some broad deadlines for completion. Elsa explained, "Well, we write our curriculum based on the standards for the state. And we work . . . we just work one-on-one with our students on their pace within our craft, given a deadline, but it's their pace." Isaac felt that the students had a better opportunity to learn with the individualized curriculum. Isaac remarked, "Some students were more engaged and more excited about something like that than others . . . that's the type of stuff he needed in his wheel house." The founding director explained that the curriculum had to meet the needs of the student, not the other way around. Debbie explained that after having taken the learning style inventory, they

> taught the students that it wasn't their fault they weren't successful, the previous school [they attended]. It wasn't because they were stupid or they couldn't do it. It was because the style, they learn differently. Not everybody learns at the same time, at the same pace.

Students had more buy-in to the program when they could see that the curriculum was designed with them in mind. As Poppy stated,

> That's something that at traditional schools they always dream about doing, but there's no practical way for that to happen. That's something that I think is a gift, that it allows the students to have a little bit more buy-in.

Debbie summed up the reason for the individualized curriculum: "We wrote curriculum so that it would have more opportunity for choice and for the students." Students also express their appreciation of the curriculum and its delivery. In his student testimonial, 18-year-old Steve explained that the curriculum at VADP encourages working at one's own pace and allows knowledge to get across fully. He also expressed appreciation at having teachers that care and teach to the best of their ability is one that really expresses knowledge to those who want to learn. In another student testimonial, an unidentified student explained that students were able to move through the challenging curriculum their own learning styles. This student felt empowered to take charge his future.

Isaac liked that the curriculum could be tailored to be authentic and relevant:

> I taught web design for many years, and we would always encourage the student to go find somebody who needs a website. Don't just do it as a dog-and-pony show for a grade. Go find somebody who needs a website, who needs this resource.

In addition, Isaac mentioned a specific example of an authentic assignment a student completed:

> As an example, he built the website and . . . in that, where you type in what you see on a snake or a reptile, like different features, or a big or a small shaped head, what color . . . and then it runs it through a database, and it checks back what it possibly could be with pictures and everything like that. I liked the real-world application.

Research Subquestion 3

The third subquestion of the study was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops teacher leaders? Theme 1: High-quality teachers is addressed in this section. All participants felt that the founding director had a very collaborative leadership style. In particular, Jacob felt that it was necessary to have a collaborative leadership style to be successful:

> We needed somebody that was very collaborative with the teachers, that believes in empowering teachers, and that believes that everybody has something to say and ownership was really important, and the way you get people to have ownership is to have collaborative leadership.

When asked directly about her leadership style, Debbie said,

> I like to think of my leadership style as collaborative because I do believe that four brains are better than one, and I like to have people with differing opinions, so we choose people with different learning and teaching styles, so that we get a broader picture of what's going on.

She felt that it was important that every teacher was also a leader. That was stated by all participants as well.

According to Leo,

> She very much taught all the people under her like I was remarking previously, that everyone is a leader and there was only a handful of us. So if someone wasn't there it was next man up. It was very much delegating, but then checking and monitoring and very inclusive and very much spirit of community. It was nurturing.

Continuing with that theme, Elsa commented,

> She encouraged everybody to take a leadership position. She did not discourage any teacher from doing that. She worked with teachers who wanted to have more of a leadership position. She'd offer us from, helping to run staff meetings, to actually running the staff meetings by ourselves, to presenting across the nation at different conferences.

As a former VADP teacher, and current director of VADP, Leo felt that part of that leadership was giving trust.

> Her philosophy was every teacher is a leader and every leader is a teacher. So she gave you that artistic freedom so to speak and I think it just kind of hearkens back to the way you teach trust is by giving it and she was really good at giving those trust.

Additionally, Ava, one of the team members responsible for creating the VADP, said of the founding director's leadership style,

> Well, by involving them with all of the decision-making. She empowered them to help make the decisions that went on in the school. She was very open. Open door policy on everything. She was not a rigid person or authoritarian person. It was, we're in this together, we're going to sink or swim.

Debbie felt it was her responsibility to prepare teachers for leadership:

> Every teacher . . . any teacher could take over at any time, go to any national conference and event. We were all in this together. I think that's what good leaders do. They prepare their successor. The program goes on, it continues when you leave.

She also was very open and up front about her abilities and her lack of abilities. She expected teachers to step up in areas where she had a weakness. According to Isaac,

> One thing I admired a lot about her [the founding director] was that she did was she was humble enough to know when she wasn't strong in a particular area, so she would kind of lean on us, and lean on her counselor or her other administrative team to help out.

In addition to general teacher leadership, encouraging teacher leadership fell into three areas, according to the participants. Those areas were team meetings, advisories, and participating in outside of school events.

Once a week, the VADP had a staff meeting, also called a team meeting. Not only were all teachers expected to attend, they were all expected to take a turn directing the meeting. Poppy explained,

> With the quote, with the agenda, with the dates, and we led the meetings, even if we had no experience doing it, we led meetings. . . . It was her [the founding director] agenda, yet we ran the meetings. It had that buy-in because everybody . . . everybody had to run the meeting, everybody had to come up with the quote. It was a big buy-in thing because everybody knew that their turn was coming.

Sophia also voiced similar sentiments:

> The other thing that was important was we had weekly meetings and every decision was made with a thumbs up or a thumbs down. We all had to buy in and there was no way that you could be really mad at her or the leader of the meeting or whoever, for making a

> decision because we all had a part of it and had to take ownership of it, like it or not. I thought those things were really cool.

In a slightly different take on the team meeting, Nicolas felt that having to take a leadership role in the meetings was great for his self-confidence:

> One of the things that she established was the weekly meetings. Those meetings were really important to me in leadership, fostering leadership in everybody. I think that was very important and I have changed my life as well, that it has served me well up to this point.

Another weekly meeting held and directed by the teachers was a card meeting.

> In the card meeting, the teachers would meet and discuss every student in the school.

Debbie explained,

> Weekly, the teachers would get together as a team and review students, so we knew who needed more attention, then work with the students on a personal basis individually, and then get to see what it is they needed to get back on track.

The teachers felt that these card meetings also added to the success of the students. According to Poppy,

> She trusted us as teachers, but more so as advisors. She believed in us enough that she trusted us to make those decisions and allowed us to guide students so that we could make their journey through this process as painless as possible.

Teachers were expected to take leadership roles in dealing with the students, not just to teach them, but to mentor and guide them as well. All students were assigned to a teacher as an advisor and mentor. According to a year-end report, assigning students to faculty advisors helps the students develop a graduation plan. With the assistance of faculty advisors, students

improved attendance. Personal contact at school with their advisors and daily phone calls to the student's home or workplace by the advisors help facilitate this improvement.

Jacob stated,

> We assigned so many kids to individual teachers and said, "You're responsible for this kid." You become kind of like a surrogate parent in that role because you're like, okay, if this kid is successful, then they'd have successful coaching or parenting or teaching of something. So, that's how we did it.

Debbie explained the reasoning behind assigning advisors:

> The students were tracked in behavior, course progress, and attendance on a card kept by the student's advisor. Each student had an advisor, a main advisor, that was like their mentor and was in charge of their card. They were like that personal counselor, a guidance counselor.

The teachers felt like the advisories helped them lead or guide their students better. Poppy explained,

> She believed in us enough that she trusted us to make those decisions, and allowed us to guide students so that we could make their journey through this process as painless as possible. That would help the student buy into the class and be more willing to take that class next.

Furthermore, Poppy added,

> We were the first face that they saw when they came in, or at least the first adult face, so that we could greet them, and then when they left, we could check out with them, so there was always a start and end. It was just that personal connection.

Teachers wanted the students to know that they were appreciated and wanted at the VADP. According to Poppy,

> We wanted every student to feel "We want you here. It's very important that you come to school; we believe in you," and we wanted them to have that adult in their corner. That was another role with the advisory had.

Another way the founding director fostered teacher leadership was through giving them the opportunity to present at state, regional, and national conferences.

As Sophia remarked, "That leads me to the travel and the presentation. We went to every dropout prevention conference, and did presentations in these places, and also the Texas Alternative Education conference." Elsa further commented, "We presented at an international conference here in San Antonio. And so those are leadership positions that other teachers at traditional high schools, might not have the ability to do." In addition to presenting at national conferences they also visited recognized programs and would then present to the school staff, and occasionally to the district staff. Debbie stated, "I loved to send them to national conferences where they presented and learned from across the nation. Really, we were all in charge. This was our program. It was our school." Evie summed it up: "She didn't allow us to be wallflowers."

Summary

Chapter Four of this single instrumental case study included detailed descriptions of the participants. The participants included two district administrators that help create VADP, the founding director of VADP, a VADP teacher who is the current director of VADP, and eight teachers who served under the founding director. The focus of this study was to seek out participants' perceptions on how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a

successful dropout prevention program. Data analysis began with Raywid's (1994b) three major indicators of a successful alternative school program. Analysis of the transcripts of the individual interviews and the focus group interview revealed six major themes: high-quality teachers, teacher–student relationships, innovative curriculum, empowered and engaged students, community involvement, and public relations. This chapter also included summarized and direct quotes from the participants to illustrate the themes uncovered in the data analysis.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

Overview

The purpose of this single instrumental case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. The following section includes a summary of this study's findings. A review of the central research question and the research subquestions are answered in the discussion. Next, the theoretical and empirical foundations for the literature are discussed. The chapter includes discussion of several implications from this study, including theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. The delimitations and limitations of this study are then discussed, followed by several recommendations made for future research. Finally, the summary of this chapter includes the important conclusions drawn from this study.

Summary of Findings

This single instrumental case study included four different sources of data collection: individual interviews, a focus group interview, student testimonials, and documents. Each piece of data created an overall description of the case study. A thematic understanding of how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention school or program emerged from the data. Five main themes that came out of the data matched up with Raywid's (1994b) three factors of successful alternative schools. The sixth main theme, public relations, was not mentioned in Raywid's work. The research questions were used to guide this study to determine how a school leader develops policies and practices that help create a successful dropout prevention school or program.

Central Research Question

The central research question guiding this study was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program? This question was asked to determine how district administrators, who were responsible for developing and overseeing, an award-winning dropout prevention school, perceived the actions of the founding director were responsible for establishing a successful dropout prevention program. It also addressed teachers who were part of the award-winning school and their perceptions of how the policies and practices of the founding director helped create a successful school. One of the district administrators who established VADP was very clear about what they did not want in a school leader. Ava said that they did not want an existing assistant principal who might come in with preconceived ideas and plans; they did not want someone who had experience as an administrator. As Ava explained,

> And we were afraid that if we put a traditional vice principal in that slot, that that's what we'd get. We'd get a traditional person who couldn't . . . it wouldn't be their fault, but they weren't seeing . . . they would be setting up a school that would be the same as we were having.

Ava continued, "We wanted someone who could see that there were other ways of treating young people. Someone looking for strategies and building a team." Furthermore, Elsa discussed why she felt the founding director's policies and programs were so effective:

> She had a vision, she had a belief, she was given a pair of keys and said, "This is your school." And she took that into an incredible program that's internationally recognized, and transformed it to a very nontraditional education, where there's no chalk boards, and there's no lectures.

In addition, Elsa asserted that the academy is all about the students: "The 360 degree student. Because her belief was, a student cannot be successful unless basic needs are met. Then, once those basic needs are met, we work on the academic success of the student in a small learning community." Ava also felt that the founding director's policies and programs are what made the academy so successful:

> She was very gifted. And I think that her skills and her . . . she is always up. She's a very caring person. She was going to think outside the box. And she was going to create something that was going to work for educators to be able to reach students.

Research Subquestion 1

The first subquestion was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader nurtures a sense of community that fosters success in a dropout prevention program? The teachers, administrators, founding director, and students (through their student testimonials) addressed the different ways in which a sense of community was built. They talked about community within the school among teachers, between teachers and administrators, and between teachers and students. Poppy talked about her experiences when she first started at VADP:

> I felt like they listened to things that I had to say, which I didn't know anything from anything, but they listened to me, they took what I said, and they gave it credence. I felt welcome, I felt like I belonged, and that was very important in that bonding.

Isaac reminisced about an annual tradition at the VADP that helped build community with teachers, students, district leaders, and parents:

> I miss those Thanksgiving lunches. Those were phenomenal. We got see former students who were happy to come back and visit. Also parents. Parents would come,

> both of former students and current students. Great PR. We were able to undo our ties and let loose a little bit, you know..

They spoke about the efforts of the larger community as well. During the 1995–1996 school year, the VADP partnered with community and academic organizations. By the 2004–2005 school year, the VADP partnered with 58 community and academic organizations. According to one year-end report, the AACC is involved in mentoring, volunteering, in-kind contributions, financial donations, and professional support to the academy. The VADP has developed community partnerships by holding graduation exercises at different community locations. One year-end report identified 21 different sites for their 32 graduations, including churches, community centers, businesses, local universities, museums, and theme parks.

Research Subquestion 2

The second subquestion was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader cultivates an environment that enables teachers to develop creative, engaging, and innovative curricula? Participants talked about opportunities to participate in relevant staff development. They talked about the founding director allowing them considerable academic freedom in developing curricula that was cross-curricular, innovative, and student-centered. Leo, a science teacher at the VADP, was able to establish a partnership with Sea World of San Antonio as a part of the Aquatic Science class: "The students are able to spend 4 days at Sea World participating in behind the scenes activities that greatly enhance their learning experience." Furthermore, Siena talked about using more project-based learning (PBL):

> This has been a shift in our curriculum writing and curriculum planning to use more PBL designs to allow students to have a different kind of educational experience, hopefully, a

> more dense or richer experience, and also to pave the way to collaboration to allow students to accelerate through multiple classes simultaneously.

Evie continued the theme of collaboration and cross-curricular efforts with the math department and other teachers:

> Even the English teachers were happy to work things in for us. The way the faculty worked together in a cross curriculum way, I think was one of the most innovative things that we did. And it became an unconscious effort after a while.

They discussed the fact that there was an atmosphere of no fear of failure. If something did not work, they could try something else. According to Isaac, the founding director gave the teachers "artistic freedom. She would help the teachers evaluate the things that were effective and the things that weren't so effective." He continued to talk about the freedom to try new and innovative things. Isaac stated that teachers were "given the freedom to try new things and innovative things. We were encouraged to do whatever was right by the student so long as you taught the standards that the state said were important and required."

Research Subquestion 3

The third and final subquestion was, How do administrators and teachers perceive a school leader develops teacher leaders? Under this subquestion, administrators talked about how the founding director believed very strongly in collaborative, shared leadership. Siena explained,

> I got here [VADP] and was given really more responsibility in terms of teacher leadership than I think I have ever had. We are a small campus so everyone has the expectation that everyone is going to have to lead and everyone is also going to have to follow.

She continued that thought by mentioning how everyone needed to pull together. Siena added that the founding director really felt that success came from all staff members: "She felt if one of us succeeded, we all succeeded. She really meant it. She really did mean it."

The teachers talked about opportunities to introduce and discuss policies and practices that would improve the overall performance of students and the school. As Elsa explained,

> She empowered us to make academic decisions based on our professionalism in the classroom. And she didn't deny you when you had an idea. If it really didn't seem to fit, she would work with you so that it could be doable at our school.

Teachers mentioned opportunities to lead staff meetings, the director's open-door policy, and opportunities to present at conferences across the nation. Elsa said, "She'd offer us from, helping to run staff meetings, to actually running the staff meetings by ourselves, to presenting across the nation at different conferences." Nicolas highlighted the idea of teacher leadership and trust from the founding director: "Sometimes she would leave the school and say, 'This [stuff] goes on even without me.' She trusted us completely with that curriculum, with the students, with everything. Her motto was right. The [stuff] goes on." Isaac summed it up nicely: "She empowered us."

Discussion

The findings of this study are closely related to the theoretical and empirical literature on successful alternative school programs that were discussed in Chapter Two. Past empirical research included in the literature review was presented to explain programs and policies that are critical to successful dropout prevention programs. The theoretical foundation for this study was Raywid's (1994b) three factors of successful dropout prevention schools. The following sections

include explanations of how this study relates to the empirical and theoretical foundation of the literature as well as additional information regarding success in dropout prevention programs.

Empirical Literature

The literature presented in Chapter Two was validated repeatedly by the study participants. The participants' remarks corroborate the literature in the areas of innovative curriculum, teacher leadership, and the ability to create and sustain community. The gap that existed in the literature was a lack of research into a specific successful dropout prevention program and almost no studies on the impact of a leader on programs and policies that help create a successful dropout program. The following sections address how this study relates to the past research and how it fills the gap for success in specific programs and the contributions leadership makes in creating successful dropout prevention programs.

The first factor discussed in Chapter Two was focused on the ability to create and sustain community. This finding was consistent with Theme 2: Strong teacher–student relationships, Theme 5: Community involvement, and throughout all factors was Theme 6: Public relations. Theme 6 seemed to be intertwined with all the other themes and will be discussed in a separate section of this chapter. During the interviews, participants constantly mentioned the policies and programs the founding principal put in place that helped create and sustain community. Literature cited in Chapter Two established the importance of strong teacher–student relationships. Several studies have shown that students who have a quality teacher–student relationship are more successful and more likely to stay in school (Brentro et al., 1990; Daggett, 2015; DeAngelis, 2012; Duhon, 1997; Fay & Funk, 1995; Hall, 1829; Wilkins & Bost, 2016). "Not surprisingly, students at greatest risk of dropping out of school are those who have never been friends with any teacher" (Bentro et al., 1990, p. 13). "Supportive environments are a very

important part of the school climate. This [a supportive environment] will allow students to work more closely with their teachers, develop relationships, and create climates which do not alienate students" (Duhon, 1997, p. 35).

Most of the participants talked about the importance of establishing a strong connection between teachers and students. Evie, Elsa, Max, Sophia, and Nicolas all mentioned that it was important among the teachers that the students develop a relationship with a teacher, and that the teachers did not particularly care with which teacher that connection was made. Sophia stated, "I really valued the collaborative nature of it, but one of the things that to me personally was the caring aspect towards the students." Evie echoed this sentiment: "We wanted our students to attach themselves to somebody to know there was an adult there who cared about them. Then they began to fly."

Building strong relationships with the community was mentioned by the participants as well. Jacob, Ava, Debbie, and Leo all mentioned that it was a founding principle of the VADP. Specifically, Leo said,

> The founding design team members . . . they published a document. But within that document that was one of the tenets, was community involvement and a spirit of community and so that has persisted through the 26-odd years of the history of the school.

Max talked about one Christmas when the students participated in gathering food, clothes, and toys to distribute to needy families in the area. Talking about the requirement for graduation, Max mentioned it as one of the things he remembered most:

> I got the honor to take the kids to deliver them to the families. That was satisfying for me, but just to see the kids' reaction, the students' reaction . . . to see how a family

> appreciated what they were doing. It still stands out as one of the highlights of my 4 years here.

Sophia mentioned that one of the things she thought helped build community was the fact that everybody had additional jobs, not just their primary academic teaching area:

> The other thing, we all had different jobs. . . . I wasn't just the English teacher. I reviewed transcripts. I had a part in graduation, in preparing students. The students led the graduation. . . . All of that, I think also helped build community.

Several of the participants mentioned the AACC and how that not only was a form of building community, but how the council, itself, helped build community for VADP.

Jacob explained, "At the Verizon Academy, we have the Verizon Corporate Council. And this council was put into place in lieu of our having a committee, like a PTA, a Parent-Teacher Organization or whatever because every campus has that." Ava pointed out that the Advisory Council was the idea of the founding director: "She formed the advisory council, who made up of businesses, and educators, and government, and various people, and empowered all of those people to be part of the school." Additionally, Siena mentioned the different people the founding director wanted and included in the Advisory Council, and how, in turn, the Advisory Council reached out to an even larger community. According to Siena,

> She built a larger community with our corporate council. They, in turn, reached out into an even larger community in terms of administrators throughout the school district, and in terms of community leaders, church leaders, and business leaders who added support.

Furthermore, Sophia mentioned that the Advisory Council also help financially support our graduates through scholarships. Sophia stated, "The advisory council, you mentioned that.

They met once a month, and it was good in order to have student support, to raise funds for scholarships."

The second section of Chapter Two was focused on having engaging, innovative, and compelling curriculum. If high schools wish to promote positive and lasting change, they must focus on structural changes and how they deliver a rigorous, engaging curriculum (Hazel et al., 2014; Hong, 2012; Izumi et al., 2013; Scogin, 2016). This finding was consistent with Theme 1: High-quality teachers, Theme 3: Innovative curriculum, and Theme 4: Empowered and engaged students. Siena mentioned that she felt free to pursue a curriculum that would benefit the students:

> I felt like she wanted us to be our most creative selves. She wanted us to open the oysters and find the pearls. She wanted teachers to feel the freedom to teach their content level, their correct content level, in the most creative, nontraditional way possible.

Furthermore, Isaac added that the founding director gave the teachers "artistic freedom. She would help the teachers evaluate the things that were effective and the things that weren't so effective."

Several of the teachers felt that using cross-curricular lessons helped the students be successful. Elsa referred to cross-curricular lessons at VADP:

> It was heavily encouraged when I first started. We were able to combine stuff from both classes. It was co-mingling our classes so that students could complete classes faster. I thought that was a very wonderful curriculum that was talked about in other schools, but not really practiced. Here, it was.

Evie felt that the cross-curricular lessons made the classes more realistic, more real-world. According to Evie,

> I would say that would be working with other subjects. But the nice thing about it is that we did a lot of cross curriculum work. All of us spent time trying to demonstrate to the students how all learning was interconnected. And how each discipline helped work with another.

In addition, Siena felt that PBL was not only open for cross-curricular work, but that it made the learning riche: "More PBL designs to allow students to have a different kind of educational experience, hopefully a more dense or richer experience, and also to pave the way to collaboration to allow students to accelerate through multiple classes simultaneously." Following on the same theme Elsa stated, "The project based learning is cross curriculum, so they could complete different lessons, let's say, in English and math at the same time, that are addressed by the PBL.

Participants also felt that innovative curriculum had to be individualized and base directly on student need. Elsa stated,

> The students have to come first student success comes first, and you have to creatively figure out how to teach these students hadn't been successful. It was how you creatively were to help that student succeed and be comfortable that they have mastered what they needed to master the curriculum.

Following up on that idea, Siena mentioned that the educational track students followed was not based on whether a student was a junior or a senior, it was based on the student's need. As Siena explained,

> Each student's needs are treated individually as they come in. It is not, "You are juniors so you are going to follow this path, and you are seniors so you are going to follow this path." Each student is interviewed and a plan is put in place for that student.

Furthermore Isaac stated,

> Well I found it to be very different. It was self-paced. Students have easier access to the teachers. The teachers were more flexible with regards to the curriculum, and helped create in-house, home-based, if you will, so they gave us some flexibility to cater to our students' needs.

The concept of instructional individualization did not always come easy for the teachers. Jacob mentioned that teachers new to the VADP sometimes had a difficult time adjusting to the academic freedom. They were looking for direction and guidance of which books to have students read, what essays needed to be covered. Jacob explained that it took some time for teachers to understand that they controlled the curriculum delivery and how they could individualize it to meet students' needs. According to Jacob, exactly what they study is not what is important, what is important is

> What is characterization, what is folly, what is confusion, what is thinking? Those are the things that are important; it's not that they read *Tale of Two Cities* or whatever, but can you then analyze and can you figure out complex situation and what did you see as thought and that sort of thing.

Furthermore, Poppy explained that individualizing the curriculum is something that most teachers would like to do, but that it is almost impossible to do in a large school:

> That's something that I think is a gift, that it allows the students to have a little bit more buy-in, and it allows them to feel that "You value what I already know and you're not going to waste my time with it."

Evie summed it up nicely:

> Well, I used to tell anybody who would listen, and everyone got tired of hearing it . . . my friends . . . that I thought I had died and gone to teacher heaven, because I was finally able to teach the way I wanted to teach. To help individuals succeed. Not a one-size-fits-all curriculum.

The third section of Chapter Two was a discussion about Raywid's (1994b) third factor of success for dropout prevention programs. This factor involves what is known as the school's culture, which flows from the degree of teacher and staff engagement, job satisfaction, and commitment.

Components of sustainability include broadening staff roles, creating culture in the school, and having collaboration between teachers and students (Louis et al., 2016; Raywid, 1994b; Tichnor-Wagner et al., 2016; Watson, 2011). Most of the themes of this study intertwine, and this is especially true when talking about school culture and climate. This fit in with parts of Theme 1: High-quality teachers, parts of Theme 2: Teacher–student relationships, subthemes found in Theme 4: Empowered and engaged students, and Theme 5: Community involvement.

A site-based study mentioned in one of the VADP year-end reports pointed out that the VADP exemplifies a true site-based decision-making model, and that both the staff and administrators work together to meet the needs of the students. When asked how the founding director helped broaden teacher roles and teacher leadership, Elsa mentioned several things, including the following: "She'd offer us from helping to run staff meetings, to actually running the staff meetings by ourselves, to presenting across the nation at different conferences." In an additional comment, Siena said,

> She would really encourage you to take on new experiences, to try it even if you didn't think you were going to like it or even if you didn't think you were going to be successful at it. She wanted you to give it a try.

The founding director felt that all teachers should be leaders at the school. Debbie stated,

> Every teacher . . . any teacher could take over at any time, go to any national conference and event. We were all in this together. I think that's what good leaders do. They prepare their successor. The program goes on, it continues when you leave.

Leo echoed that sentiment, and stated that the founding director's "philosophy was every teacher is a leader and every leader is a teacher."

When asked specifically if the founding director's leadership style contributed to the success of VADP, Jacob said,

> Oh, I think it was the ultimate thing that made the academy successful. Certainly, you have to have teachers in a classroom that are passionate, and they have to buy into the program but you have to have a passionate leader in any of these programs for them to be successful.

Jacob stressed the importance of the founding director and her ideas for the success of VADP: "She certainly shaped the culture of the academy. We knew that she had the creative center."

A *TorchBearer* article mentioned that students, teachers, and administrators were all in this together. Students work in teams to find successful solutions. They learn to accept the unique talents of each other and honor that diversity in a family atmosphere. Additionally, Evie talked about the culture of a team at VDAP:

> The culture was all for one and one for all. Everybody even the teachers really seemed to care about each other. If there was something that needed to be done, well, we would just do it. Most of the students cared about each other and cared about their teachers.

It was important to the sustaining quality of the VADP that new students understood the culture and community of the school. According to a year-end report, each staff member presents at the new student orientation. Through that participation and interaction with the students a bond develops between the students and the staff members. Through this bonding, the students begin to feel as though the Academy is a second home, and the culture and climate of the VADP is established.

Theoretical Literature

The theoretical grounding of this study is found in Raywid's (1994b) three factors of successful alternative schools, of which a dropout prevention school is one. Raywid (1994b) posited that all successful alternative schools share these three factors. First, they all generate and sustain community. Second, they all make learning engaging. Third, they all put in place a structure that will sustain the first two factors. This current study revealed a fourth area that all participants mentioned as being critical to the success of VADP, which was the area of public relations. A member of the selection committee that hired the founding director talked about how the founding director got her school in the public eye. Jacob described,

> She was very good at marketing her program. . . . You have to get other people on board. She would reach out there and get people on board . . . other people would say, "I want to be a part of that, I want to see it be a success."

Additionally, Poppy said,

> Something that I didn't appreciate at the time, but have come to appreciate now, is she was very good at getting us out there in the public eye, getting our name out there, getting our. . . . She was very good at making sure people knew that we were here and what we were doing.

Furthermore, Isaac commented on the need to bring the spotlight to the program: "In fact, I remember her saying, 'No one's going to toot your horn. You've got to do it for yourself.' She wholeheartedly believed that the staff were the rock stars that we know we are, that people knew about." Jacob felt that publicizing one's program was a key ingredient of good leadership:

> Any time that you can present your students in a positive way, you do that. But you have to work hard at that. That's a whole other avenue that a good leader has to be good at and that is promoting their program.

One of the ways the VADP publicized themselves was with a year-end report.

Jacob compared running a school to running a business: "A business with no sign, is a sign of no business. And so, every year, we bring a year-end report." Continuing, Jacob explained the purpose of the report:

> We would use the year-end report as a tool that we use to encourage people to participate, encourage them to be on the academy corporate council, encourage them to donate money, time, effort or in-like contributions, got to have the confidence to be able to do that.

Debbie discussed why the VADP published the annual report: "We had to show success. That was another reason we felt so compelled to claim as many stakeholders as we could. We developed a year-end report." Debbie explained the different areas that the year-end report covered:

> We had surveys from students who would answer questions about the school, what they'd found successful, and what was still needed. We had to report on our finances, and the money that's spent. We had to report on any staff development we had for that year.

In addition, Debbie explained to whom they would distribute the report and why:

> Then we distributed to the students, the parents, community, all the people at the school district, administration, and all of the divisions. Also, that was especially helpful in that it brought more people that support this school and, consequently, we could grow, have more students, and more teachers, so that we could expand the program.

Another tool that the founding director used to publicize the VADP was a newsletter that was published three or four times a year. According to Elsa, "One of the things that she did to get people, in order to get people to understand our program, and I hated it, was the newsletter. Even though it was a pain to write, it was pure PR."

Whenever the students were involved in activities outside the campus, the founding director always made sure they were easy to identify as VADP kids. According to Jacob,

> We also put kids in Academy t-shirts any time we take them out. The community easily recognized [the students] at bike rodeos, at book fairs, at Special Olympics, and then that creates positive energy and positive comments about them. And that's how you do the PR."

Faculty and staff were also expected to be at activities. Sometimes, it was in support of the students; other times, it was just to be out in the public eye. Sophia explained, "It seems like when they were recognized, when our students would do the pledge at the board meetings for the school district, we all showed up in our red, white, and blue to support our students who were there."

Additionally, Poppy stated,

> You were expected to be there. At graduations, the GED graduation, the district graduation. You are all there, you sat together, you all wore red, white, and blue because she wanted to make sure we were very visual. She'd remind everybody that we are here.

The founding director led by example as well. She did the same things she expected the staff to do. According to Ava,

> She made presentations to the city council. To the county. She did many, many things that would make people aware of what was going on in the district. Because everyone was working with children at-risk, but with the big hot topic, what are we doing about our dropouts?

Interestingly, staff members who knew her well said that she would prefer not to be in the public eye. Sophie explained, "And she hated that part of it herself. That was not an easy thing for her, for her personality, but she knew the importance of it, what she did. And she insisted that we all do it."

Another area that the founding director would put in the spotlight was the three graduations the VADP would hold or participate in each year. They held a VADP graduation in December and in June each year. They would also participate in the district summer school graduation. Ava talked about having the graduation in different locations throughout the community:

> This is the founding director's idea. Well, that not only introduces the students to various places like art museums, churches, Sea World, Fiesta Texas, to community places. But it introduces the community places to the Academy and what you're trying to do here, you know? It lets more people know what these students are all about.

Not only would the founding director have the graduations in different community locations, she would reach out to the media and get coverage of the graduations. Ava stated, "She was an expert at getting TV coverage for the graduation ceremonies. Over and over and over again. The TV would cover the ceremonies." The founding director also reached out to the media to cover other aspects of its innovative design. According to a *TorchBearer* article, Catholic Television of (the local city) featured the Academy on its weekly *City Spirit, City Year* show. The VADP was featured because of its community service graduation requirement.

The founding director understood that it was important to get students into the spotlight, and that would also put the program in a good light. Debbie explained, "They [the students] would go with teachers and advisor council members to Optimist clubs and other organizations, service organizations and talk about it. Everybody was on the same page with the same philosophy and the same culture and everything." Not only would students go out into the public eye, but the public often came to the VADP. When visitor toured the academy it was the students who led the tours. According to Debbie,

> The students would also greet people, and visitors who came to the school. We had a lot of visitors from across the nation and in the state. They would greet visitors and they would give the tour and take them around each classroom, introduce them to the teacher. They learned a lot about communication skills and leadership.

This would increase the visibility of the Academy and of the success of the students.

Visitors were impressed by what they saw. The founding director talked about what visitors would see when they came and, as Debbie related, "They specifically said, 'you can feel the difference when you walk in the door'. By that, they meant it was comfortable. It was welcoming. The kids were happy. They were surprised. The kids were happy."

The founding director also felt that when staff and students were recognized with awards that it would help continue the success of the entire program. The VADP started with four teachers and 26 years later, when the founding director retired, they had 10 teachers. It was still a pretty small school; however, over the years they won many district, city, and state awards. Siena stated that the founding director was happy when any staff member won an award. She felt that when a staff member won an award the school was successful. When the school was successful, the students were successful. As Siena explained,

> If one of us won an award or was recognized for something, no one was happier than she was, not just for us, but because she realized the validation that it gave the school that we had one a district award or a state award or a regional award or whatever it was and that we were a teacher at Verizon Academy.

Elsa added that VADP teachers won more than their fair share of awards because they had a very focused mission:

> When people read our stories, and they read the wonderful examples of what we have done, a lot of the staff here are just amazing people. People that I've worked with, they stand out. They were the best of the best.

The founding director also won numerous awards. A VADP year-end report listed several of the awards she won. She invited to Chair the 18th Annual National Dropout Prevention Network Conference by the Executive Board of the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPC/N) at Clemson University, South Carolina. In addition to chairing the conference, Debbie won the Crystal Star Award for Leadership in Dropout Prevention awarded by NDPC/N. The teachers at the VADP were quick to point out that even though the founding director won numerous awards, bringing the spotlight to the VADP was always her focus. Elsa remarked,

> It was, she's doing it . . . yeah, her name's going to be out there, but it's as the director of this amazing program, and you knew she would do what she needed no matter how anxious she would get, you all need to give, and you all need to start applying for your own awards, even though that's really hard, because we need that name recognition.

Evie talked about attending a conference with another VADP teacher. They were in a session being presented by an award-winning dropout prevention school and the title of the presentation was, "How to Begin an Alternative School That's Not a Punitive School." Evie described,

> The main presenter said, "Before we get started, I would like to introduce two people who are here from the school that we modeled our school on." The presenter, then, she introduced the two of us. That was amazing, to get that kind of recognition.

Another way students are valued is by allowing them to participate and present in national conferences.

According to the *TorchBearer*, several students attended conferences share their ideas about what contributed to their withdrawal from the traditional high school. They also talk about the strategies that are leading them to successful completion of school at the VADP.

The Academy touted many of its student successes in the *TorchBearer*. Students were recognized for their achievements in a DECA Inc. competition when four students won the District 2 DECA Inc. competition. Another article highlighted students' academic achievements when 100% of the students taking the state-mandated test passed all three areas of reading, math, and writing.

Implications

Dropout prevention will continue to be an issue for public schools. The existing literature includes what can be done to help students to become successful and graduate;

however, there is insufficient research on how a school leader can develop a successful dropout prevention program. This single instrumental case study helps to fill that gap. There are theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for this study conducted to discover how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program.

Theoretical Implications

Dropout prevention is important in our public schools. There are economic, societal, and personal issues that are a result of students failing to complete high school. Raywid (1994b) established three factors of a successful alternative school: (a) the school generates and sustains a community or culture, (b) the school makes learning engaging and innovative; and (c) the school creates a structure that will sustain the first two factors, including enlarging staff roles and ownership in the school. These three factors were confirmed in this study. In addition, a fourth area was identified by all participants as essential to the success of a dropout prevention program. The fourth factor was public relations.

The public relations factor intertwines with the other three factors. Participants indicated that it was vitally important to have community and culture that defines the program. They indicated that the community and culture are enhanced and broadened through public relations. Part of the community and culture of the VADP was the establishment of the AACC. The Council then reached out to a larger audience to publicize the successes of the VADP which, in turn, enlarged the community and those who would work to continue the success of the VADP. Teachers would create innovative and engaging curriculum to reach students who were previously unengaged by the learning process. As a result of these successes with students, the

teachers were recognized at the local, city, state, and national levels. By publicizing the high-quality teachers, more interest in the continuing success of the VADP was generated.

The founding director talked about the time when the original grant money was about to run out and the program would need to be funded by district funds. She was at a conference when one of the administrators involved in getting the original funding called and let her know the program was in danger of being cut. She then reached out to the Council and others. They showed up at a board meeting, armed with success stories that had been published about the VADP and were successful in getting continuing funding for the program. The program grew and was successful based on the three factors mentioned by Raywid (1994b); however, it was because of the publicizing of those successes that the program was able to continue.

Empirical Implications

The majority of dropout prevention literature is focused on Raywid's (1994b) three factors of successful alternative school programs. Lacking in the literature is researchers focusing on an individual successful program and determining if that program followed Raywid's (1994b) three factors. In addition, while almost all literature includes mention of the importance of strong leadership in a successful dropout prevention program, there is almost nothing that specifically addresses how a leader can develop policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. This study fills that gap.

Interviewing both teachers who worked for the founding director of VADP helped further understanding of some of the programs and policies the founding director put in place that helped make the VADP successful. Interviewing the district administrators who were responsible for establishing VADP helped further understanding of the type of leader they felt was essential to creating a successful program from the ground up. Finally, interviewing a

participant who was both a teacher under the founding director and is now currently the director of the VADP provided another perspective on how leaders are critical to the success of a dropout prevention program. This study fills the gaps by specifically identifying policies and programs the founding director put in place that helped create the success that is the VADP.

Practical Implications

This study has several practical applications. In Chapter Two, Raywid (1994b) mentioned 11 characteristics that led to her three factors of success for alternative programs. The participants of this study confirmed those characteristics. The founding director and the teachers often mentioned that because the VADP was a small program, they were able to do things that large schools could not do. Even though small, due to the nature of the program (i.e., students leaving upon program completion), teachers ultimately worked with the same number of students over the year as would teachers in a traditional program. Another important consideration to keep in mind is that the director and staff that created the VADP were the same people who were teachers in the Academy.

All of the participants were clear that any successful dropout prevention program must focus on the students first. That all decisions, from curriculum to attendance policies to teacher selection, student selection, and discipline must have their focus on student success. Allowing teachers to be creative in meeting all of the state-issued standards allowed them to individualize curriculum to better meet the needs of the students. By instituting flexible attendance policies, the VADP met the requirements of the state as well as the needs of the students. The curriculum was modified and individualized to cover just those areas of weakness in a student, instead of making a student go over the entire curriculum again. Students were allowed a voice in the curriculum. Not only were they able to have input regarding the order in which they completed

their classes, but they were also allowed input on how to complete specific standards, often suggesting to the teachers a project or assignment that would show their mastery and meet the state standards.

All the participants felt that an orientation, a multiday introduction to the uniqueness of the Academy, what the students would find that was different about the Academy, and what the Academy expectations of the student were. Participants emphasized that the VADP was a school of choice, not just for the students, but for the staff as well. They mentioned that the one or two times a teacher was assigned to the school instead of choosing to be there, it was not a good fit for the teacher and that teacher rarely was successful.

Another practical implication of this study is that it illustrated the importance of getting buy-in from all participants in order for the school to be successful. Teacher and staff buy-in were an important process of the hiring decision. Existing teachers were asked to always be on the lookout for a teacher or a staff member who had the VADP spirit. That was the strong conviction that all students could be successful if they were presented curriculum in a way that made sense to them. Students knew that teachers and staff sincerely cared about the students' complete success, not just academic success. The district community was brought into the family of the school through showing the successes of the school by having students participate in district public events such as Memorial Day presentations. School principals were brought into the community of the VADP by being personally invited to the VADP graduations by their former students. The greater community was brought into the VADP family by the establishment of the AACC.

Finally, the VADP was successful because the founding director made sure that everybody knew they were successful. She encouraged the highly qualified staff to seek out

opportunities to be recognized by the greater community and promoted that encouragement as one of the reasons the VADP was successful. The founding director also followed her own instructions to the staff by seeking out opportunities for her to be recognized, not for her personally, but to bring accolades to the VADP. She also made sure that there were ample opportunities for recognition of the VADP itself. There was media coverage of graduations, which were held at venues all over the city. There was radio, television, and print coverage when VADP students volunteered to help out at various events, such as the City-Wide Special Olympics, Habitat for Humanity house builds, a Sea World partnership with the VAPD Aquatic Science class, and any other activity that would bring a positive light on the success of students at the VADP.

Delimitations and Limitations

All studies, by design, have delimitations and limitations. The parameters set for a study are delimitations. The design I chose for this study was that of a single instrumental case study. Creswell (2013) stated that in a single instrumental case study, the researcher focuses on an issue and then selects a case to illustrate the issue. The purpose of this current case study was to understand how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. Yin (2014) also pointed out examples of case study methods involving programs with at-risk youth. Because dropouts are considered at-risk youth, a case study method was an acceptable method for the current study.

Another delimiting factor of this study was the selection of participants. Participants were chosen because they had direct interaction with the founding director of VADP. They all worked under her for part of their careers as teachers. It was important as well that all participants have experience in alternative education; specifically, dropout prevention. Creswell

(2013) mentioned that getting participants from varying genders, positions, and experience will help provide a large variation. This present study included among its participants, three retired administrators, all involved with the creation of the VADP; and a former teacher at the VADP, who is currently the director of the academy. The remaining participants are teachers. Of the 12 participants, four are males, seven are females, with five participants still working in education and six of the participants now retired. The participant experience in education varied from 12 to 45 years at the time of the study.

In every study, there are limitations as well. Selecting a single instrumental case study created a limitation for this study. While the methodology was sound for selecting this type of case study, perhaps selecting a multicase study would have provided a richer and more varied result. Another limitation of this study was the selection of the participants. I was able to get a selection of both male and female participants with a wide range of experience levels. I was hopeful of including in my participants all of the original, founding teachers; however, even after repeated attempts (emails, U.S. Postal Service, and telephone calls), all declined to participate.

Recommendations for Future Research

Dropout prevention is going to continue to be a concern for education and warrants continuing study. Dropouts are more economically disadvantaged, more likely to commit crime, and have a less stable adult life than high school graduates. It is important, as a society, that we help as many students as possible to become high school graduates. More studies on successful dropout prevention programs are merited.

This study was a single instrumental case study of one highly successful program. It might be beneficial and fill gaps in the research to do a multicase study. Another area of study

may be looking at multiple leaders of successful dropout prevention programs and investigating what programs and policies they have implemented.

Finally, the VADP has gone through two additional directors since the founding director retired. A possible future study would be to examine their different leadership policies and programs. Additionally, a future study could be conducted to determine if, under their direction, the VADP continued to be successful, diminish in success, or become even more successful.

Summary

Dropout prevention is going to continue to be an important issue in education. Districts are going to need to find practical, powerful, and effective ways to meet that challenge. The purpose of this single instrumental case study was do discover how a school leader develops policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. The 12 participants of this study were interviewed in both individual interviews and a focus group interview. They were asked about policies and programs implemented by the founding director of the VADP and how they thought those policies and programs impacted the success of the Academy. The findings were consistent with past research and added a possible missing factor to the success of dropout prevention programs. Previous research established that all successful dropout prevention programs have innovative and engaging curriculum, they create a culture of community, and they provide a structure which includes such things as broadening teacher roles, and decision-making within the school. The additional finding was that all the successes within the school need to be publicized.

The implications of this study are clear. Dropout prevention must be addressed for the continued success of our students. Districts need to find ways to help these students who do not fit the mold to find ways to be successful, not only in academics, but also in life itself. I know

that in a summary quotes are not common, but I feel this statement by Evie nicely sums up this study:

> Verizon is such a perfect way to let students succeed. It is a wonderful thing to hear them [students] tell you how much they had learned, how they had never worked so hard, and been so proud of themselves for their successes. All education should be like Verizon.

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APPENDIX A: SAMPLE OF YEAR-END REPORT

HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The Academy [redacted], a non-traditional alternative campus for at-risk youth in the [redacted] School District in [redacted] Texas, was established with seed money from The Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Education Economic Policy Center (EEPC). Innovative School Grant funds from TEA and EEPC partially financed the operation of the school from June 28, 1991, through December 31, 1992.

The Academy [redacted] began its first classes for challenged youth September 16, 1991. Using a non-traditional approach to education, [redacted] is the collaborative result of a design team composed of educators and community representatives. The design team envisioned a campus where challenged youth ages 16-21 would have a totally different environment in which to learn and where the instructors would use innovative teaching models and teaching strategies. This creative approach would improve student achievement by changing the ways in which students were taught, increase student competency in challenging subjects and raise student achievement levels. Incorporating this philosophy, the grant for the project was written by [redacted] Community Education Department. Today, the project is funded by local funds, compensatory education funds, career and technology funds, special education support, and community resources.

The project, endorsed by Dr. [redacted], Superintendent, and [redacted] Board of Trustees, is coordinated by [redacted], Associate Superintendent for Instruction and [redacted], the Executive Director of Special Programs. They serve as chief consultants to the Academy education team. Through their leadership former dropouts are empowered to become tomorrow's problem solvers, thinkers and leaders.

APPENDIX B: SAMPLE OF THE *TORCHBEARER* NEWSLETTER

TorchBearer

Winter, 1996

Volume 5 — *Lighting the Way* — Number 15

Commissioner [redacted] gives keynote speech for winter commencement

100 seniors eligible to graduate

The Academy [redacted] was honored at their winter commencement when Texas Commissioner of Education, Dr. [redacted] delivered the keynote address to graduating seniors.

Dr. [redacted] built his speech around the word "persistence" because it relates well to the efforts Academy students must exert in order to graduate from high school.

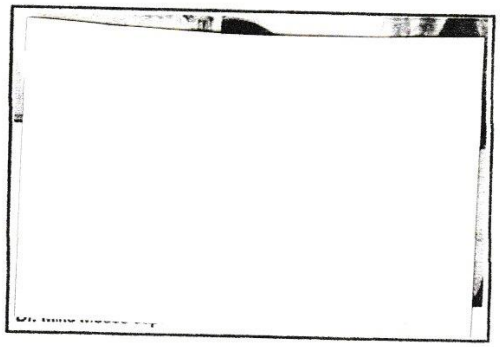
"I was impressed - even stunned - by the Academy's class-act program."
Dr. [redacted]

Speaking to an audience of 450 at the [redacted] Country Club on December 12, Dr. Moses joined [redacted] Board of Trustee member [redacted], Associate Superintendent for Campus Administration, [redacted]; Associate Superintendent for Instruction, [redacted]; and Academy Director, [redacted], in leading the ceremony.

Serving as masters of ceremonies were Academy students [redacted] and [redacted]. Graduation candidates [redacted], [redacted], and [redacted] also participated in leading the program.

The Woodland String Quartet from [redacted], under the direction of [redacted], provided music for the traditional processional and recessional.

(see names of graduates, p. 15)



Academy moves to permanent home

Students and staff at [redacted] worked diligently together during November to move the entire Academy into their new facility at [redacted].

Originally housing [redacted] central administrative staff, the brick building was already home to [redacted] math, science, and GED programs.

The Academy now shares space in the new building with the [redacted] police department as well as the community education department. In addition, some of the data processing department is still in the building.

With a few modifications, the building has been turned into a warm and friendly learning environment.

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE OF STUDENT TESTIMONIAL

Quentin

Age 18

For about 5 months, It was necessary for my mom, sister, and me to live in a shelter. While there, I really learned to value the independence of family life. When we left the shelter, we bounced around living with friends and relatives. I finally was able to move in with my aunt and found a stable, loving environment.

As a result of moving from school to school, my attendance suffered and I found myself a 5th year senior. Through the help of my father, I found out about [redacted] At the academy, the teachers determined where I had left off in my course work and what I needed to finish. The designed my personal graduation plan that allowed me to cross the stage today.

The quiet and tranquil school atmosphere helped me stay focused and finish my work on time. I am confident of my future success because of the knowledge I gained in my economics and government classes. I am now very aware of the economic =balance in my community and my conytry and how it affects successful businessmen. I understand the power of the people both in the United States and abroad and how they impact economic prosperity.

After I graduate, I will move to Houston where I will start and run my own commercial mill shop. I will work along side of my father who will help and guide me along the way.

In my exit interview, my principal asked me what suggestions I had for improving [redacted] I had to wait 6 months after putting in my application before I was finally enrolled. It is my suggestion that students be given assignments to work on while they waiting to get a seat at the Academy. That way a student could work on curriculum at home and keep his spirits up while waiting to complete the requirements for a diploma.

APPENDIX D: IRB APPROVAL

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

June 26, 2018

Alan J. Sorensen
IRB Approval 3318.062618: How a School Leader Creates a Successful Dropout Prevention Program: A Case Study

Dear Alan J. Sorensen,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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APPENDIX E: LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE TO ADMINISTRATORS

05 Jan 2018

Dr.

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear Dr.

As a graduate student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an EdD degree. The purpose of my research is to understand how school leadership establishes policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. At this stage in the research, how school leadership establishes policies and programs that create successful dropout prevention programs will be defines as programs that lower the national dropout average of 80%. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, and have knowledge of the leadership policies and practices used at the Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention (a pseudonym), and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. It should take

approximately 30 -60 minutes for you to complete the procedure listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please contact me via email, phone, or regular mail. I can be reached via email at ajsorensen@liberty.edu You can phone me at [redacted]. Regular mail can be sent to: Alan J Sorensen, [redacted].

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the interview. The consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Alan J Sorensen

Doctoral Candidate

Liberty University

School of Education

APPENDIX F: LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE TO TEACHERS

05 Jan 2018

[Teacher Name].

[Address 1]

[Address 2]

[Address 3]

Dear [Teacher].

As a graduate student in the Education Department at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an EdD degree. The purpose of my research is to understand how school leadership establishes policies and programs that create a successful dropout prevention program. At this stage in the research how school leadership establishes policies and programs that create successful dropout prevention programs will be defined as programs that lower the national dropout average of 80%. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, and have knowledge of the leadership policies and practices used at the Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in a focus group. It should take approximately 60-90 minutes for you to complete the procedure listed. Your participation will be completely anonymous, however I will

not be able to conceal your identity from other members of the focus group. Any personal or identifying information will be kept confidential.

To participate, please contact me via email, phone, or regular mail. I can be reached via email at ajsorensen@liberty.edu. You can phone me at [redacted]. Regular mail can be sent to: Alan J Sorensen, [redacted].

A consent document will be given to you at the time of the focus group. The consent document contains additional information about my research, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the focus group.

Compensation will be in the form of renewing old friendships, plus food and non-alcoholic beverages will be provided during the focus group.

Sincerely,

Alan J Sorensen

Doctoral Candidate

Liberty University

School of Education

APPENDIX G: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: ADMINISTRATORS

Standardized Open-Ended Administrative Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
2. How long were you a supervisor?
3. Why did you select the founding director to lead Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
4. How would you describe the founding director's leadership style?
5. How do you think her leadership impacted the success of Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
6. In what ways did the founding director enable teacher leadership?
7. You were part of the team that wrote the original grant for Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention. Do you think the founding director's leadership impacted the shaping of the culture and direction of Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. Was there anything at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention that you now, looking back, think could be changed to make the school an even better experience?
9. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: FOUNDING DIRECTOR

Standardized Open-Ended Founding Director Interview Questions

10. Please introduce yourself to me, as if we just met one another.
11. How long were you an administrator?
12. How would you describe your leadership style?
13. How did being an administrator at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other leadership experiences?
14. Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?
15. How would you describe the culture at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
16. What did you do to encourage teacher leadership at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
17. What did you do to encourage engaging and innovative learning at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
18. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

APPENDIX I: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS: TEACHERS

Standardized Open-Ended Teacher Interview Questions.

1. How long were you a teacher at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
2. How did teaching at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other teaching experiences?
3. Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?
4. Will you describe any innovative, engaging curriculum used at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
5. In what ways did the founding director enable teacher leadership?
6. How would you describe the culture at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
7. Could you describe the feeling of community established at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

APPENDIX J: FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions.

1. How long were you a teacher at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
2. How did teaching at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other teaching experiences?
3. Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?
4. Will you describe any innovative, engaging curriculum used at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
5. In what ways did the founding director enable teacher leadership?
6. How would you describe the culture at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
7. Could you describe the feeling of community established at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?
8. What else would you like to tell me about this program?

APPENDIX K: INFORMED CONSENT FORM

How School Leaders Create Successful Dropout Prevention Programs: A Case Study

Alan J Sorensen

Liberty University

School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of how school leaders can create successful dropout prevention programs. Specifically I will be looking at one specific leader. You were selected as a possible participant because you were a teacher at the time this leader worked at the school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Alan J Sorensen, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is an attempt to learn how school leaders establish policies and programs that create successful dropout prevention programs. I will specifically be looking at one principal.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:

If a member of the focus group I would ask you to participate in a focus group to be held in the San Antonio Public Library, Conference Room A. This focus group will be held on [INSERT DATE]. This focus group will take approximately 1.5 hours. It will include teachers who taught

at the Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention during the time Dr. Debbie Johnson (a pseudonym) was principal.

If an interviewee, I would ask you to participate in a one-on-one interview with me at your home or a location of your choosing. This interview will take approximate 30 – 60 minutes and would be held on ([INSERT DATE].

Risks and Benefits of Participation: The risks involved in this study are minimal.
The direct benefits participants should expect to receive from taking part in this study are an opportunity to renew old friendships and to contribute to the body of knowledge on effective policies and procedures for successful dropout prevention programs.

Benefits to society include the development of policies and procedures that can enhance dropout prevention programs to be more effective.

Compensation: Focus group participants will be compensated for participating in this study. Compensation will be in the form of an opportunity to renew old friendships. Also food will be provided during the focus group meeting.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

Participants will be assigned a pseudonym

Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations. Any and all printed data, audio recordings and video recordings will be kept in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all records will be deleted

I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study:

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Alan J Sorensen. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact him at

[redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty advisor, Dr. Kenneth R. Tierce. , at [redacted].

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

☐ The researcher has my permission to [audio-record/video-record/photograph] me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant Date

_____

Signature of Investigator

APPENDIX L: SAMPLE INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT (CLEAN COPY)

Interview #1

Evie

Q1: How long were you a teacher at the Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention?

A1: Eight Years

Q2: How did teaching at Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention compare with your other teaching experiences?

A2: Well, I used to tell anybody who would listen, and everyone got tired of hearing it, my friends that I thought I had died and gone to teacher heaven, because I was finally able to teach the way I wanted to teach. To help individuals succeed. Not a one size fits all curriculum.

Q3: Verizon Academy of Dropout Prevention has been recognized as a model program. What specifically do you believe has led to this success?

A3: We, the staff, we would serve the needs of individual students. All educators pay lip service to individual differences but were unable to really do that with 35 kids, for 45 minutes or more. You try but you can't. At the academy we were able to help each child address what they need not what they have already covered, and succeeded. They could work on what they were unsuccessful with, that was the thing that made the school work. And the students appreciate that we didn't go back and make them re-invent the wheel, for instance, in Algebra, perhaps they did poorly in one aspect of Algebra and that caused them to fail the entire semester. We would give them a test to see how much they did understand and then pick up the work where they were where they started falling apart. I mean, where they started to be unsuccessful, and the students appreciated that. They also appreciated the fact that we gave them credit and praise for what they

did know and remembered. By credit I don't necessarily mean that was in the grade book, I mean they would be praised, "That's great, you don't need this, let's move on."